

Chapter 7: GM-Free Schools

Introduction

Working with parents, students, and school officials to take genetically engineered ingredients out of school meals is a powerful way to protect children's health and increase awareness of the hazards of genetically engineered food. GM-free school meals campaigns are important and effective, and it's a great time to embark on this effort as communities all across America are now working to implement GM-free policies in their school systems.

In recent years, parents, school administrators, and students have become increasingly aware of the importance of improving the nutrition of the food served in American schools. The child obesity and diabetes epidemics, the proliferation of ADD/ADHD, and a better understanding of the connection between food and behavior have all contributed to the emergence of a national "healthy school lunch" movement. Several school systems have made sweeping changes to their meal programs, and new parents are consistently the largest group of new buyers of organic food each year.

In addition, the US government has taken steps to upgrade school nutritional standards - the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, for example, states that all school districts with a federally funded school meals program develop and implement wellness policies that address, among other things, nutrition and nutrition education by the start of the 2006-07 school year.

A critical component of improving the health and safety of school meals is the removal of genetically engineered ingredients from school meals. Children face the greatest risk from the potential dangers of GE foods:

- Children are more susceptible to allergies.
- Children are more susceptible to problems with milk.
- Children are more susceptible to nutritional problems.
- Children are in danger from antibiotic resistant diseases.

Schools throughout the UK and parts of Europe banned GM food years ago. In the 1990s, many Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) in the US rallied against rBGH and more than a hundred school districts banned milk from rBGH-treated cows. Wisconsin dairy farmer John Kinsman describes the method he used to inspire several schools: "I simply talked to parents of small children. Once mothers heard about this, they didn't rest until their school made the commitment."

A number of school systems in the US have recently instituted nutritional policies that increase the amount of healthy, organic food choices they offer their students. These schools have found this shift not only curbs obesity, but also increases students' abilities to concentrate. In the US, public schools are paid state and federal dollars according to the number of meals served, and those districts that are providing students salad bar and organic options are also seeing school lunch participation increase dramatically, sometimes even doubling, which is a boon to the school as well as to the health of their students.

Focusing on a campaign that exposes the health risks of genetically engineered foods is also an effective way to bring new constituencies into the movement to resist genetic engineering. Public health officials, children, teachers, and parents across the political spectrum can become

deeply engaged in GM-free school meals campaigns, as everyone wants to protect kids from substances that can harm their health. Launching a GM-free school meals campaign will boost the visibility of this issue in your community and broaden the base of support for your on-going efforts to shift agriculture away from genetic engineering.

The Institute for Responsible Technology, the Organic Consumers Association, and others developed excellent materials around GM-free school meals campaigns for groups to use. Some are included in this chapter. The Institute for Responsible Technology and the Sierra Club also created an excellent film, “Hidden Dangers in School Meals,” which you can access from the Institute’s website, www.seedsofdeception.com. The Institute for Responsible Technology and GEAN also offer on-going organizing support and strategy advice for communities adopting these campaigns.

Campaign Steps

- **Educate yourself, your children, parents, and school officials about the dangers of genetically engineered foods.** Start by grounding yourself in a solid understanding about the hazards of GMO food. The book “Seeds of Deception” provides powerful information about the health risks of GMOs. You can order the book or read highlights at the Seeds of Deception website, www.seedsofdeception.com. Then you can distribute the fact sheet about the dangers of genetically engineered foods included in this section of the toolkit to friends, parents, and school administrators, or organize community screenings of the video “Hidden Dangers of Kid’s Meals” at your home, your local library, or community center. Start developing a list of other concerned community members who would like to work on removing GMOs from your school’s meals.

- **Hold your first organizing meeting:** Call the folks you have identified who would like to get more involved in working on this campaign, and schedule a meeting. This can be an informal affair at someone’s home or a local park, pot-luck style or you can provide snacks. (For more on organizing an initial group meeting, see the “How to Form a Local Group” section of this toolkit.) Find out why the people there are concerned about this issue, and decide together what you would like to accomplish. No GMOs at all in the school? No rBGH dairy products? More organic foods offered? More food from local farms?

Then divvy up some tasks for people to take on before your next meeting. The next steps are likely personal education (point folks towards Seeds of Deception or other information about the health hazards of GMOs so they can deepen their understanding of the issue) and research. You will need to determine what shifts need to be made at your local school(s), who you need to influence to make the changes you seek, and how the school can source the GMO-free ingredients you’d like them to start using.

- **Determine your target decision maker:** Do some research to find out who at your local school has the power to remove GMOs from school meals and phase in healthier food options. Is it the school board? The superintendent? Does the school chef help decide what ingredients are used? Do individual schools make decisions about the meals they serve, or are they part of a bigger city- or county-wide school meals program? Call or drop by your local school, or contact your PTA or school board, and ask them who makes decisions about the ingredients used in school meals.

- **Survey Your Current School Lunch Offerings.** Figure out what is currently being served in the school cafeteria, and where the food is coming from. There are four primary GMO crops in our food supply: corn, cotton, canola, and soy. The majority of all these crops grown in America today are genetically engineered, so unless these ingredients are labeled organic, it is a safe bet to assume they are GE. Many dairy products also come from cows that have been treated with rBGH (recombinant bovine growth hormone, a genetically engineered hormone)—for more specific information on the hazards of rBGH, please see the “rBGH-Free Dairies” section of this toolkit.

Most processed foods contain one or more ingredients derived from these crops; soy lecithin (an emulsifier), cottonseed oil, corn syrup, and canola (also called rapeseed) oil are in a staggering number of products on our grocery store shelves. When you look into which foods are being served in your local schools, pay attention to which oils are being used, what soft drinks and snack foods are served, where the milk comes from, and if any fresh produce is coming from local farms.

- **Research alternatives:** Spend some time figuring out how the school can source GMO-free ingredients to replace the genetically engineered products they are using. This is important, so you can provide the decision-makers with positive solutions that would allow them to make the changes you seek.

All certified organic foods must be free of genetically engineered ingredients; are there organic alternatives to any of the processed foods they are using, that would not contain GMO ingredients? Could they phase those processed foods out for fresh alternatives? Could they substitute sunflower or olive oil for canola, corn, or vegetable oil? Could they start sourcing fresh fruits or vegetables from local farmers rather than buying frozen vegetables? Which products do local farmers have to offer to schools? What are the differences in price between the GMO-free and genetically engineered ingredients?

The more of this research you can do, the better your meeting with your decision maker will be. If you can list out some of the ingredients or products you want them to phase out, and provide them with a list of alternatives to those items, where they can source the new ingredients, and the differences in cost, you will make it much easier for them to determine which of the changes they are prepared to make. It will also help you understand which changes will be easier for the schools to make and which will be more difficult.

- **Meet with your target decision maker(s):** Once you have come to understand the dangers associated with GMOs in school meals, figured out what is currently being served in school meals, and sourced alternative, GMO-free ingredients, set up a meeting with your decision maker. Share your concerns and your findings with them, and hear what they have to say. The process of phasing GMOs out of school meals and seeing all the changes you seek come to fruition could take some time. If your decision maker is not ready to make all the changes you have asked for right away, be patient and be flexible. If needed, start with smaller steps, changing just one or a few items offered in the school, and just keep working to change the foods offered at your school until they are as safe and as free from genetically engineered ingredients as possible.

- **Celebrate your successes:** If your decision maker agrees to implement some or all of the changes you asked for, be sure to share this victory with the local media. This will not only provide good publicity for your decision maker and your school, it will also help increase community education about this issue and may well inspire other schools to make similar changes. Also, don't forget to contact GEAN and let us know about your success. We can help you share your story widely with the national media and with other GE activists across America. Your success will help build the national narrative about community resistance to GMOs and will be an important next step in moving American agriculture away from genetic engineering.

- **If decision makers are not prepared to make changes:** If you encounter resistance, and the decision maker is not willing to hear you out or make any shifts in the foods served at your school, don't despair. Just ramp up your organizing! Determine who else influences your decision maker. You may want to meet with other important members of the school community, including school administrators, teachers, and the PTA, and garner their support for the campaign. You can ask these groups to sign statements of support, you can collect signatures from parents, students, and community members on petitions to your decision maker, write letters to the editor of the local paper, or organize events to build support for your campaign, garner media attention and put pressure on your decision maker.

If you are having a hard time moving ahead, please contact GEAN or IRT and we will be happy to help however we can. And remember that all you do to increase awareness about the dangers of GMOs creates positive momentum in this movement, and that victory can be measured in many different ways.

Genetically Engineered Foods Threaten Children's Health

The genetic makeup of plants and animals have been feeding humans for thousands of years. Now genetic engineers are changing that genetic structure in ways that are unprecedented in human history. Genes from bacteria, viruses and insects are being spliced into our food and incorporated into the human diet for the first time ever.

Internal documents from the Food and Drug Administration show that agency scientists warned that genetically engineered (GE) foods might create toxins, allergies, nutritional problems, and new diseases that could be difficult to identify. Although they urged their superiors to require long-term tests on each genetically engineered variety prior to approval, the agency ignored the scientists. Official FDA policy now claims that genetically engineered foods are no different from conventional foods, and do NOT require safety testing. A manufacturer can introduce a genetically engineered food without informing the government or consumers.

Proven problems with GE foods: The biotech industry often claims that there have been no proven health problems due to GE foods. This is misleading for a number of reasons.

One is that no one has been monitoring the impacts of GE foods on public health. These foods are not labeled in the US, which makes health affects even more difficult to track. The few animal feeding studies that have been conducted on GE foods have shown grave human health effects, including:

- Damage to the immune system and vital organs
- Potentially pre-cancerous conditions
- Stomach lesions
- Early death in animal test subjects.

Other studies have shown increased infant mortality rates in newborn rats whose mothers were fed genetically engineered soy; potential respiratory and intestinal problems in humans from inhaling genetically engineered pollen; and the creation of new viruses in human and animal cells from genetically engineered vaccines.

Children face the greatest risk from GE foods:

- *Young, fast-developing bodies are influenced most*
 - Children's bodies develop at a fast pace and are more likely to be influenced and show the effects of genetically engineered foods. That is why independent scientists used young adolescent rats in their GE feeding studies. The rats showed significant health damage after only 10 days, including damaged immune systems and digestive function, smaller brains, livers, and testicles, partial atrophy of the liver, and potentially pre-cancerous cell growth in the intestines.
- *Children are more susceptible to allergies*
 - Children are three to four times more prone to allergies than adults. Even tiny amounts of allergens can sometimes cause reactions in children.
- *Children are more susceptible to problems with milk*
 - Milk and dairy products from cows treated with the genetically engineered bovine growth hormone (rbGH) contain an increased amount of the hormone IGF-1, which is one of the highest risk factors associated with breast and prostate cancer.
- *Children are more susceptible to nutritional problems*

- A 2002 report by the UK's Royal Society said that genetic modification "could lead to unpredicted harmful changes in the nutritional state of foods." They therefore recommended that potential health effects of GM foods be rigorously researched before being fed to pregnant or breast-feeding women, elderly people, those suffering from chronic disease, and babies.
- *Children are in danger from antibiotic resistant diseases*
 - Children prone to ear and other infections are at risk of facing antibiotic resistant strains of bacteria, due to the use of antibiotic resistant genes in GM food. The British Medical Association cited this as one reason why they called for a moratorium of GM foods.

How to protect your children from genetically engineered foods: Although foods with genetically engineered ingredients are not labeled in this country, you can still protect your family from the dangers of these products:

- Certified organic foods cannot contain genetically engineered ingredients. Try and buy as much organic, locally-produced food as possible.
- The majority of American-grown corn, soy, cotton, and canola are now GE. Pay extra attention to these ingredients on food labels, which are in the majority of processed foods on our grocery store shelves. Check out the True Food Network's Shopper's Guide for a comprehensive list of GE foods and their non-GE alternatives at www.truefoodnow.org/shoppersguide.
- Speak with the manager of your local grocery store about the hazards of GE foods and encourage them to source more GE-free products.
- Join together with others in your community to move your local schools to take genetically engineered ingredients out of school meals. Check with the Genetic Engineering Action Network to find out about groups working on this issue in your area at 563-432-6735 or info@geaction.org or with the Institute for Responsible Technology, info@responsibletechnology.org.

Further Resources for Creating Healthier School Meals

- INSTITUTE FOR RESPONSIBLE TECHNOLOGY — This group is coordinating a national effort at promoting GE Free Schools. <http://www.seedsofdeception.org>
- MODEL SCHOOLWELLNESS POLICIES— Developed by a work group convened by the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity. <http://www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org>
- GENERATION GREEN — Developed “Safeguard our Students (SOS)” campaign which has as one of its goals to remove genetically engineered ingredients from schools. <http://www.generationgreen.org>
- COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY COALITION — Information on Farm to School programs. <http://www.foodsecurity.org>
- CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER HEALTH— Nationwide initiative to improve children’s health and well-being through whole-food nutrition and healthier school environments. <http://www.betterhealthcampaign.org>
- ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS — Partnership of more than 40 national organizations and government agencies set up to address the “epidemic of overweight, sedentary, and undernourished youth” by focusing on changes in schools. <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org>
- CENTER FOR SCIENCE IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST’S SCHOOL FOODS TOOL KIT. <http://www.cspinet.org/schoolfood/>
- SEED STEWARDS provides an innovative whole-school model using sustainability, food and communitybuilding as themes to integrate learning. <http://www.growseed.org/>
- COMMUNITY SEEDS: A Case Study of Sustainable Agriculture Project —The SAP uses an agricultural service-learning model to both connect students to community-based initiatives dealing with food and agriculture. http://www.mdihs.u98.k12.me.us/community_seeds/

(See www.geaction.org to download a pdf attachment to Chapter 7, Sample Petition)