



## **Nourishing Minds, Fueling Futures: How Food Impacts Students' Ability to Thrive (with Dr. Marlene Schwartz) (Transcript)**

*Educator Wellness Podcast*

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### **[PODCAST INTRO] 0:00 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Hello, everyone. I'm Kari Vogelgesang, your host of the Educator Wellness Podcast, here to share and promote my life's work and passion, all things wellness. But not just any wellness. We're here to discuss wellness specifically as it pertains to educators. I am a former elementary school teacher, and I am passionate about helping educators see wellness in a very different way. This podcast is dedicated to educators across the globe, creating a space for us to come together in an authentic and therapeutic way, sharing our stories, our hopes, our joys, our fears, our sorrows, and hopefully creating some space to share some laughter with one another as well in our journey to learn how to support one another, to prioritize wellness, and enhance our overall well-being. Please join me as we talk with nationally recognized experts to guide us on a transformative journey of self-discovery, helping us to embrace and weave all dimensions of wellness into the fabric of both our personal and professional lives. Also, please note that the opinions and perspectives that are shared on this podcast do not necessarily represent those at the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health or the University of Iowa.

**1:14 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Welcome to the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health Educator Wellness Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Kari Vogelgesang, and I'm really excited to have you with us today. We are going to have a really enlightening conversation focused on school nutrition programs. Did you know that in the fiscal year of 2022, the United States Federal Government spent approximately 28.7 billion on the National School Lunch program, serving over 4.9 billion meals? And as many of you know, this has raised a conversation about whether or not we should even be offering school meal programs at our K-12 schools, and is it the role of our government or our schools to provide meals for PK-12 students? What are the real benefits, and do they outweigh the costs? Well, today we are exploring this topic with Dr. Marlene Schwartz.

Dr. Schwartz is the director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health, and she's a professor of human development in family sciences at the University of Kentucky. Dr. Schwartz studied how nutrition and wellness policies implemented in schools, food banks, and local communities can improve food security, diet quality, and health outcomes. Dr. Schwartz earned her Ph.D. in psychology from Yale University in 1996, and prior to joining the Rudd Center, she served as co-director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders from 1996 to 2006. She has received research grants from a variety of funders, including the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the United States Department of Agriculture, and the National Institutes of Health to study federal food programs, school wellness policies, the effective food marketing on children and strategies to address food insecurity and diet quality.

She is also the recipient of the 2014 Sarah Samuels Award from the food and nutrition section of the American Public Health Association. She's the 2020 Faculty Service Award recipient from the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, and the 2021 Community Engaged Health Research Excellence Award from the Institute for Collaboration on Health Intervention and Policy at the University of Kentucky. Team, in today's conversation, you will see that we're going to discuss the essential role of school nutrition programs. We're going to uncover the benefits of a healthy school nutrition plan. We'll explore practical strategies for implementing and maintaining these plans. So please stay tuned as we dive into how we eat and what we eat and how that impacts us in our teaching and our learning and our overall wellbeing and our school communities. You won't want to miss this.

**4:25 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Okay. Welcome Dr. Schwartz. I'm so happy to have you with us today to talk about this, what I think to be a critically important topic, which is food nutrition in our schools. So, welcome.

**4:39 | Dr. Schwartz**

Thank you. I'm happy to be here with you.

**4:41 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Yeah. And I always think it's fun to just start at the very beginning with you, our guest. And can you just tell us just a little bit. I read your bios in the introduction always, but maybe tell us just a little bit more about you and how you even came to this career path.

#### **4:57 | Dr. Schwartz**

Sure. So my training is clinical psychology, and when I first graduated from my program, I was hired as the co-director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders. So I was actually treating families, children, adults, adolescents with eating or weight concerns. And after doing that for about 10 years, I came to the conclusion that particularly with childhood obesity, it's so difficult to treat, and I was looking at how the environment was really working against families when it came to raising their children to be healthy eaters and to be physically active that I decided to switch my focus and start studying the environment, and schools just seemed like the best place to start, because if you want to influence a lot of children through policy, that's one really effective way to do it.

#### **5:49 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Yeah. It makes sense when you make that connection for us, and when you're talking about to treat somebody with some issues and then how important and prevalent how impactful schools really are in our lives, all of our lives, students and parents, and particularly so, talking today about nutrition programs. So I read a statistic recently that said something like the United States spends somewhere around 28 billion dollars on school nutrition programs. Does that pan out? Does that seem about fair and when you're thinking about some of the work that you've done?

#### **6:32 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Sure. So the National School Lunch Program is something that reaches nearly all K-12 students in our country, and I really see it as one of the most important and effective ways to make sure that our children are A, eating breakfast and lunch, and also are eating nutritious meals. So I consider it kind of right up there with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or food stamps, or the WIC program is another one. It's just one of the really important food programs that our federal government invests in, and I think that it's shown to be really effective.

#### **7:14 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Yeah. So can you take us back a little bit and talk to us, or maybe share with us what you know about... Have we always provided meals to students in K-12 schools? When did this come about? Do you know? When did it start?

#### **7:33 | Dr. Schwartz**

So it started back in the '40s, and it was originally developed actually because of concerns about the military, because there were not enough well-nourished, at that point, young men to join the military. And so the federal government really saw it as kind of a national security issue. And so that's when the National School Lunch program started. And it kind of went along for several decades. And I think a lot of the meals were made by probably women who were in the community who were working in the school cafeterias and were providing meals. And then there was quite a shift in the '70s when the food

industry really started processing a lot of foods, making things that we now think of as kids foods. The Happy Meals became a thing, this idea that kids eat pizza, hamburger, and chicken nuggets, and that's about it started to become more prevalent. And in my opinion, unfortunately, the school meal program started to look a lot like that. It started to almost look like a food court at a mall.

And so then in the '80s and '90s, the role of the food industry in the school meal program became more and more prevalent, and then it wasn't until we started seeing rates of childhood obesity rising in the early 2000s that there was enough political will to kind of come back and try to really implement some stronger nutrition standards. There were always nutrition standards, but because it was developed because of a concern about lack of enough calories, there were only calorie minimums, not maximums. And so everything had to really change when the concern wasn't so much malnutrition due to not enough food, and in fact, it's malnutrition due to the wrong foods.

**9:30 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Yeah. I think that history is fascinating, actually, and I remember both my mom and dad talking about how when they were going to school when they were children, which would've been... So my dad was born in 1945, they remember showing up at school and smelling all the fresh bread that they had made that morning. Isn't that [inaudible 00:09:55]?

**9:55 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Yes.

**9:57 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

And then they would sit down and there'd be like... literally they baked them that morning, like cinnamon rolls and bread on every table.

**10:04 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Wow.

**10:05 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Obviously it's just changed so much since then. I think you started to lead us into this space of like, "Okay, so this is how they started, and the rationale for starting them, and where we're kind of at today." Why are they so important? So, lately, I've heard conversations, which quite frankly, in my opinion, work has been concerning about legislators even getting into discussions about, well, people should just send meals with their kids to school, and do we even need to have these programs? So why is it so important?

**10:48 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Well, I think that the research is really quite clear that this is one way to reach, I think, 19 million children every single day. And the rates of food insecurity unfortunately are really stubborn that even... I think the most recent data is from 2022, and 12.8% of households in the United States experience food insecurity. And when you look at households with children, it's an even higher rate. It's one out of six households with children have food insecurity. And food insecurity is when you are worried that you are going to run out of food before you have enough money to buy more.

So if a child is coming to school and is hungry, or worried about there being enough food, clearly they are not going to be in the right frame of mind to sit and learn and achieve academically. So I really see the school meal programs the same way I see the computers and the computer lab and the equipment and the gym. It's one of the things that we need to provide, like books in the library, in order to make sure that children can learn, and I see it as fundamental as those other pieces.

**12:04 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Yeah. So that was speaking to... and I'm thinking about my time in the classroom as well. I was an elementary school teacher for about 10 years, and definitely I can think of even specific kids that would come and I would know that they're just in no way, shape, or form ready to sit and learn until they have been fed. And so that was the learning piece of it. But can we also talk a little bit about how nutrition or your diet affects students' mental health and stress levels?

**12:41 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Sure. So I think, again, going back to food insecurity, in addition to the physical sort of concerns that arise from not having enough food, it also is very stressful. It's associated with other mental health concerns, not just for the child, but for the family. And the research is interesting, in particular the moms, as you can imagine. And so I think that having parents know that their children will be able to eat at school provides some relief if they are stressed about food in the household. And of course then the child is going to feel a whole lot better when they have that food.

And again, in terms of the nutritional quality, we all kind of know we feel better when we're eating better, and so I think that we can do studies to show it, but there's some things that are just... people understand. And so in order to make sure that kids are kind of in the best psychological and kind of physical shape to be able to learn, it's important to make sure that they're getting all the nutrients that they need, and that's well established that the sort of dietary guidelines for Americans are based on decades and decades of research showing that these are the foods that will help people thrive.

**14:01 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

So what are some of those foods? What we're providing in schools, is that aligning with what we know through research about what we need and what children need?

**14:16 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Sure. So basically every 10 years, the federal government updates the dietary guidelines for Americans, and the most recent version that hopefully people are familiar with is MyPlate. It used to be the pyramid, way back when. The pyramid went out, MyPlate came in, and essentially, MyPlate is half of your plate should be fruits and vegetables, and then you have a quarter that are grains, so whole grains are recommended, and then a quarter for protein. And here you want to really try for the proteins low in saturated fat, and then you have a dairy serving. And in addition, there are healthy oils that you want to incorporate into your diet like olive oil, but you really want to keep the sort of desserts or snacks to a minimum, something like 10% or less of your calories should be coming from what they call discretionary or empty calories. It's not that you can't ever have dessert, it's just that it needs to be a small portion of what you eat during the day.

**15:22 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Can you tell us a little bit about what a whole grain means?

**15:24 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Sure. So with grains, there's a fair amount of processing that goes on between when it's sort of growing in the field to when it ends up on your plate. And so whole grains have a limited amount of processing. So these tend to be brown rice instead of white rice, whole wheat bread instead of white bread, et cetera. And then other sorts of grains out there are sort of naturally whole grains, things like bulgur or quinoa or things like that.

**15:54 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

As you're talking about this, I am going back to something you said earlier, which is we made this shift in our nutrition programs, and you said around the '70s, '80s, into the '90s, where we start to do this Happy Meal kind of presentation of food in our school nutrition programs. Where does that come from, do you think? Why did we start to suddenly think that kids really only or will only eat these highly processed foods, which I think is what a lot of people... I agree with you. They do think kids, chicken nuggets, pizza, white bread. Where did this come about? Was it just financial reasons?

**16:39 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Well, I really put a lot of the responsibility on the food industry, the elements of the food industry that are really built upon processing food and selling processed foods to Americans. And so one of the things that we study at the Rudd Center is food marketing directed at children. And there's been an incredible increase in the amount of food marketing directed at kids, and there's been pretty unsuccessful efforts to kind of push back on that. But because of sort of the first amendment and the way our country is structured, it's very hard to tell corporations that they're not allowed to say something.

So I think that the food companies realized, and it was really in the '70s when, interestingly, there was a lot of commercials for sugared cereals, and the dentists were pushing back, because they felt like it was leading to more cavities. And then decades later, we're still seeing sugared cereals, and now it's the sort of public health nutrition people who were pushing back. So we've done research showing that kind of



fast food, cereals, snacks, and sugary drinks are the big categories where there's just tremendous amount of money put into marketing those to kids, and frankly to the parents trying to convince them that this is what your children want, this is what your children should eat.

**18:08 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Now we're kind of maybe getting into policy slash strategies a little bit here with this next line of questions, but are you seeing schools changing, having some kind of response anyway, to this issue that we're talking about, and changing some of their strategies or policies about what they are providing to kids during the day at school?

**18:36 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Yes. So as I was mentioning, the dietary guidelines for Americans, part of the regulation for school meals is that they need to reflect those guidelines. So that's where the rules are coming from. And there was kind of not a whole lot done to update the school meal standards for a few decades until the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which was championed by First Lady Michelle Obama, and really came from many years of advocacy to try to bring the school meals into alignment with the dietary guidelines as they are required to be. And so that was, I'd say, the biggest change that's happened in my career, was the regulations that emerged after 2010 from the USDA started requiring more variety of fruits and vegetables, just also more volume of fruits and vegetables. There were now regulations with calorie maximums and not just those calorie minimums, so that was new. And there were requirements in terms of low fat dairy and sort of lean protein sources.

And the other thing that happened that was really notable is that prior to that, there's all the stuff that in many schools is sold outside the school lunch. So there's sort of that official school lunch, the one that comes on the tray that everybody knows what that looks like, and then there's the snacks or a la carte items, and it varies from district to district, but some districts, particularly for the older grades, have a lot of those. And for many years, they were hardly regulated at all. The list of things that you couldn't sell was incredibly short, and you could basically sell sort of cookies and french fries and pretty much anything that you wanted, and that changed because of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. So for the first time in decades, the USDA was able to create regulations for what they call smart snacks, which are essentially saying that these snacks need to meet certain rules about saturated fat and sodium and added sugars.

So that was the good news. The not so good news is that the food industry is always a step ahead, and they started reformulating. So what happened was there was a very short period of time, especially the states that passed legislation before the federal government legislation, where a lot of those snacky kind of junky foods were out of schools. But quickly, they started reformulating Doritos and Cheetos and cookies and cakes, and they were able to make the portion sizes smaller and reformulate them just enough so that those foods would get back into the schools and they would be branded. And we've spent a number of years trying to raise awareness about this, and we call them copycat snacks, because basically there's Doritos sold in your child's school, they're not even the same as the Doritos sold at the grocery store. They're like special school Doritos.

**21:45 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Wow, that's wild.

**21:46 | Dr. Schwartz:**

But anybody looking at the package is going to immediately know they're Doritos. The branding is identical. And so it's kind of frustrating all around, because on the one hand, you're continuing to market those products to kids, and even though the ones they're eating in schools are slightly healthier, you can't even buy them at the grocery store. And so it's super, super frustrating, and it's been very difficult to find ways to take those foods out of schools.

**22:20 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Okay. So do you feel like you have some or could share some effective strategies for engaging key stakeholders like legislators, parents, community members, in developing different policies or different types of better nutrition plans?

**22:39 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Sure. So the federal government, I think, has done its part in terms of setting these standards for the entire country. States can go beyond that, and states could pass legislation that have additional requirements, especially when it comes to these copycat snacks. But I would say, for most of us, the most effective thing is to try to do it at the district level. So an interesting thing that a lot of people aren't aware of is that really since 2006, every school district that participates in these federal meal programs is required to have a school wellness policy, and it should be on your website, and if it's not, email the superintendent and ask them where it is. But basically, every district in the country is supposed to have a written policy that reassures the public that they're following all the federal guidelines, says any additional guidelines, which is where a school district could very easily say, "You know what? We're not selling those snacks. We're just not." End of story. They're completely entitled to do that.

They also need to talk about nutrition education and how they are providing nutrition education in school, and they have to talk about physical activity and say what the district's policies are around both physical education and physical activity. And so that was a really big step in the right direction back in 2006 because it was kind of giving school districts a very concrete mechanism that they could use in order to set some of these stronger policies. And we've been studying these policies for many years, and one of the other things that came out of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act is now they have to be revised every three years.

So your average person may not know this, but food service directors are going to know the term triennial assessment, because that is the required process that every district needs to go through where they check their policy, they look at what they're actually doing, they bring together... Part of the rules is you have to have a committee, this isn't just one person by themselves, so it needs to have administrators, food service, hopefully the health and PE teachers, parents, students, and really bringing



the community together, oftentimes school nurses are part of this group, to say, "Let's comprehensively look at what we're doing in these domains and how can we do better."

#### **25:10 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Okay. Well, first of all, that is super interesting, and I would love to be on that committee to be honest with you, because I think this is such an important part of just our communities in general, and how we not only just educate kids, but care for each other in our communities. But do you know of a specific school or community who's done a really good job at this, coming together and...

#### **25:36 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Yeah. So I think probably every state has kind of superstar school districts that have really come together and done that. Way back when we did our first study on this, which was... it was after the 2006 original guideline, we actually scored here in Connecticut. We scored every single school district's policy, and for a small state, we have a lot of school districts. It's like 159. And so we found that New Haven, Connecticut actually had the strongest policy in the state, and they had really pulled together a very strong committee with lots of stakeholders, including people who are focused on physical health as well as mental health and just achievement and education, and they really wrote a super strong policy. So that is one of the places where we've done some of our researches in New Haven.

#### **26:31 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Okay. So in maybe some of your final thoughts to share with our listeners today, what would be some of your strongest recommendations for school districts across the nation in terms of what you can feasibly do to make some pretty significant changes in the quality of nutrition that you're providing? Not just necessarily students, but educators eat that food too. So providing our students and educators.

#### **27:04 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Sure. I think it's really about communication, and then it's really about financial support. So there's kind of an interesting phenomenon in the school meal world where sometimes it's the lower-income districts that have a large number of children who qualify for free and reduced meals that actually have an easier time in this domain, because they're able to do what we call universal free school meals. So there's basically, once you get to a certain level of a percentage of students who meet those criteria, or you can show that your community where you are meets certain criteria in terms of income, you just provide free meals for everybody, free breakfast, free lunch.

And we've been studying that as well because it's definitely a best practice, and it's something that really kind of takes all that bureaucracy, paperwork, and checking, having the kids pay or swipe a card and all of that. It makes it much simpler to deliver the meal program. And I think it gives the food service directors time and ability to then focus on making it the best program that they can. Because they really are operating on a shoestring, unfortunately, and so there's not a whole lot of reimbursement, even though it's supposed to be enough to meet the standards. But I think it's difficult. And so there are school districts that will cover additional expenses so that the food service director doesn't have to

cover everything. There are also states that provide additional resources for school meals. And right now, there are grants from the USDA that offer things like extra funding to promote farm to school programs where you try to get more fresh produce in from the local community as well as training, sort of culinary training, and things like that.

So there's money out there, but unfortunately, I do think finances are a very big driver that is an obstacle. So I think efforts to try to bring more money in are important. And then the other is just communication. We live in a very diverse society, and so pulling together committees in school districts where you really try to understand the different cultural cuisines that people like, and having a culture of taste testing and getting feedback from the students, all of those things really help make your program more successful, because then it really feels like the community is part of making some of those decisions. And every food service director I've ever met, their hearts are absolutely in the right place. They're doing the absolute best they can, and they have very picky audience, and they have kids saying one thing and parents saying something else, and then their school district looking at their bottom line. I really feel like we need to support them as much as we can and work with them so that they can really provide the best meals that they are able to.

### **30:12 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

Well, I think that is perfect advice to leave on today. And it's so interesting to me because basically every episode, I feel like at the end of the episode, we come back to this idea of we have to work together as community members to support each other and to build systems that allow us to be our best selves. And here we are again, ending basically on that same very note. So I do appreciate you and coming on today and sharing your wisdom with us, because we all know how important nutrition is in all of our lives. So thank you.

### **30:49 | Dr. Schwartz:**

Well, thank you so much. It was great to be here with you.

### **30:50 | Dr. Vogelgesang:**

It was fun. Thank you.

Thank you so much for joining us on today's episode of the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health Educator Wellness Podcast. We have had a very insightful conversation with Dr. Marlene Schwartz about the critical role of school nutrition programs. We explored the significant benefits these programs provide, from improving student health and academic performance, to supporting community wellbeing as a whole.

I think one of the things that I took away from this conversation today is that it seems clear to me that investing in school nutrition is more than just providing meals to people. It's about ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive. Proper nutrition seems to me to be an essential part of how students develop cognitively, physically, it impacts their concentration, their overall success. And I think even beyond the classroom, we can say that these programs help to foster healthy communities by reducing food insecurity and just in general promoting better lifelong health outcomes.

Our discussion underscored that building a strong, stable society requires collective efforts and investment by all of us, and by supporting school nutrition programs, we're able to contribute to a system that can help everyone reach their maximum potential. So remember, it takes a village to create lasting positive change, and your involvement really does matter. Thank you for listening today, everyone, and we hope you'll join us next time from our conversations on how we can support the wellbeing of our school communities. But until then, I'm your host, Dr. Kari Vogelgesang, forever cheering you on.