

## The chef's campaign for a better school lunch

By Nancy Shute

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Christopher Kimball thought it would be so easy: Point out that school lunches are unhealthful, and taste awful, too, and the Tater Tots would disappear from the menu. But with legislation he backed to reform the federal school-lunch program sidelined in Congress's rush to adjourn this week and hit the campaign trail, Kimball feels it's time to move the battle to the home front. "This is not going to be an easy thing to solve," he says.

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Kimball, founder of *Cook's Illustrated Magazine* and nerdy star of the PBS cooking show *America's Test Kitchen*, was turned on to the issue when his son told him he wasn't eating lunch at school because it tasted so bad. Kimball found that the fare included frozen french toast with fake maple syrup. "It was horrible." So he started prodding schools in the Boston area to reform their lunch menus and founded Parents Against Junk Food, an advocacy group that is lobbying Congress to raise nutritional standards for the federal school-lunch program. Under the current rules, which are 30 years old, schools can sell fare like french fries, Snickers bars, and Cheetos.

Kimball's efforts are part of a nationwide push to dejunk school lunch as a first step in reversing the epidemic of childhood obesity. Since 1980, rates of obesity have doubled in kids and tripled in teens. Three quarters of teenagers don't eat the minimum daily recommended servings of fruits and vegetables. In Boston, 25 percent of high school students are overweight or obese.

Kimball's not the only celebrity chef to take up the cause. In California, Alice Waters, founder of Berkeley's famed organic restaurant Chez Panisse, has been working with schools there for years to start their own gardens. In England, Jamie Oliver successfully lobbied Prime Minister Tony Blair to increase funding for more nutritious school lunches and restrict junk-food sales.

But Kimball has discovered that being a household name in cuisine doesn't mean it's easy to change federal policy—or family habits. Legislation he supports to reform the \$8 billion federal school lunch program is stalled in Congress. There's infighting among healthful-food advocacy groups over whether schools should ban nutritious but high-fat foods like cheese. Kimball has come to the realization that the enemy may not be the federal government, the school systems that make money by selling junk in vending machines, or the processed-food manufacturers—it's ourselves. "Parents are feeding kids the same things at home," Kimball says of nuggets-n-Tater Tots cuisine. "This is their regular diet."

That doesn't mean he's giving up the fight. "You can't say to adults, 'Eat your vegetables,'" Kimball says. "But you can say, 'The kids are in a school system, and there can be rules and regulations.' It's the one opportunity we have." And the changes can be as simple as offering fresh fruit instead of canned fruit cocktail, or not offering dessert at lunch. "You don't have to grow the arugula out back," he says.

Kimball happens to know that adults can change their eating habits, too. In his experience with the audiences of his magazine and cooking shows, "You see people

who didn't cook before," he says. "They try it, they like it, and they realize what they've been missing."

Ready for a change? Try Chris Kimball's recipe for wholesome mac 'n' cheese:

[Parentsagainstjunkfood.org](http://Parentsagainstjunkfood.org)

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