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## Change on menu of school lunches

**■ Movement aims to quell tide of obesity among children**

By **CAROLYN LOCHHEAD**  
WASHINGTON BUREAU

**WASHINGTON** — A federal program that began in 1946 to remedy the shocking malnutrition seen among World War II recruits is being transformed into ground zero in the nation's new war against obesity.

The national school lunch program and other food programs under the Child Nutrition Act, due for a five-year rewrite, may be the most promising avenue to improve the nutrition of a generation of children who think food comes out of a wrapper and who face shorter lives because of their rising weight.

The costs of treating the chronic illnesses stemming from obesity, already at \$147 billion a year, threaten to swamp the nation's foundering health care system.

"Think of it as a down pay-

ment on a preventative health care program," said Anthony Geraci, director of food and nutrition for the Baltimore City Public Schools, who just won an award for increasing purchases from local farms to \$1 million a year. "The upfront costs of feeding our kids better food are wiped out on the back end by the high cost of treating Type 2 diabetes. To me, it's a no-brainer."

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## NUTRITION: School gardens spreading

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This program and a raft of others that feed more than 31 million children a day — and half of all infants born in the United States — will be at the center of the new anti-obesity campaign that first lady Michelle Obama rolled out Tuesday.

Once-radical innovations are starting to go mainstream, including the school gardening movement, championed locally by Houstonian Gracie Cavnar and her group Recipe for Success, along with Urban Harvest. The concept is aimed at reconnecting children with real food. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has fielded a team of advisers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to carry out the idea of linking schools with farmers.

National nutrition standards are being upgraded, schools got stimulus money to help them rebuild their kitchens and training of school food preparers is getting increased attention.

Students and teachers are using Web sites that display school meals to shame school cafeterias into compliance. The sites show schools attempting with varying degrees of success to add fresh vegetables and fruits.

"I know a lot of people think school lunches are getting better, although if you ask parents and kids I doubt they would have that opinion," said Susan Levin, director of nutrition education for the Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine.

School chefs say it's hard to feed children a decent meal on \$1, which is what many have left after their overhead.

The Obama administration budgeted an extra \$1 billion a year for lunch programs to expand access and raise reimbursements to districts for meals. Schools now get \$2.68 per lunch.

"There are some individual food service managers around the country who have just made amazing transfor-

mations, using much more fresh food, more local food, getting rid of the packaged and processed foods," said Leslie Mikkelsen, managing director of the Prevention Institute, an Oakland, Calif. nonprofit group.

The institute's approach to improving nutrition and physical activity in poor communities is being picked up by the administration, whose new budget proposed a "healthy food financing initiative" that would attract grocery stores to poor neighborhoods and help independent grocers improve their offerings.

### Unhealthy paradox

In schools, there is a move afoot as well to force outside fast-food vendors and snack vending machines to meet the same nutrition requirements as those of school cafeterias.

These foods are sold to the same children getting subsidized federal meals, said Jim Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Center, an advocacy group in Washington. "There is very broad agreement that there needs to be some tougher regulation of food that isn't part of the federal programs."

Complicating matters is the paradox of rising obesity and food insecurity in poorer households, which Weill contends can be explained, in part, by the higher cost of fresh, healthier food, the lack of a place for safe physical activity in some neighborhoods and too little time for working parents to prepare fresh meals.

Vilsack said a recent survey found that only a third of all high school students met recommended levels of physical activity; about a quarter played video or computer games three or more hours on average each school day and a third watched television three hours or more.

Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., and chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, will have princi-

pal authority over re-writing the Child Nutrition Act this year and said his objective are to improve access and nutrition quality. The legislation covers a broad array of programs, including the Women's, Infants and Children program that has recently seen a vast expansion of the number of fresh food items available.

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