

**Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity**

REVOLUTION FOODS

INTRODUCTION

Revolution Foods was founded in 2005 with the purpose of providing healthy, fresh food to students on a daily basis. Prior to meeting in business school at UC Berkeley, co-founders Kristin Richmond and Kirsten Tobey both worked in educational contexts where they repeatedly observed the poor quality of food children were consuming. Motivated by a shared desire to change the nutrition environment in schools, Richmond and Tobey collaborated on an innovative business plan to bring higher standards to school meals while keeping down costs. Today, Revolution Foods is an inspiring success story, reaching four markets and providing 50,000 healthy meals per day to underserved kids.

THE CLIMATE

Revolution Foods was born out of Richmond and Tobey’s direct engagement with educators, parents, and students in diverse settings. Collectively, their experience includes teaching, building new schools, helping recruit outstanding teachers, and designing conservation programs for kids. While working in these contexts, the two noticed that in their conversations with principals, students, and parents about the issues that were most concerning, the topic of food and health “would always come up.” Richmond remembers a particularly pointed conversation with one teacher who said she felt like a hypocrite teaching about food and health in the classroom, knowing that kids were being served taco pockets and Cheetos during mealtimes.

Richmond and Tobey grew particularly aware of the need to bridge the access gap that makes it more difficult for schools serving low-income students to provide nutritious food. “You go into communities and you see kids at lunchtime heading to the local corner store where at most there is a wire rack with an onion, a lime, and a banana,” says Richmond. “We were trying to answer the question of how you create a fresh, inexpensive, healthier meal.” Richmond and Tobey observed disparities not just *between* schools, but also *within* schools. Higher-income districts, they noted, receive the same funding for meal programs as poorer districts, the difference being that fewer kids in higher-income districts rely on subsidized meals. This sets up a disparity whereby, in a single school setting, children’s dietary standards may vary widely based on economic status, making it difficult to send a consistent message about the relationship between eating habits and health.

Along with the sometimes low standard of school food and troubling disparities in access, Richmond and Tobey observed that many staff, including school food directors, felt powerless to address the problem. They commonly assumed that even if healthier alternatives were offered, students would reject them. “There is this widespread expectation that kids will choose junk,” Richmond explains. “We wanted to transform that expectation, and promote lifelong healthy eating habits by offering kids a chance to choose healthier options.”

POLITICAL SUPPORT AND PUBLIC WILL

As Richmond and Tobey set out to remove the barriers schools faced in providing students with healthy food, they recognized the importance of simply listening to children, staff, and parents communicate their experiences and needs. “There is no better way to be successful than to empower someone to have a voice and make a choice, and this was not something associated with school food,” explains Richmond. This inclusive approach ensured that the business plan for Revolution Foods would evolve from an understanding of economic as well as social and cultural factors, and that those most affected would be participants in shaping it from the start.

Revolution Foods faced significant economic challenges. Richmond and Tobey had to figure out how to provide tasty, freshly prepared food to students within an unaccommodating cost structure, and without compromising their standards. Working within the federal reimbursement rate of \$2.68 per meal, they sought to procure meat and dairy produced without hormones or drugs, fresh fruits and vegetables, and foods free of high-fructose corn syrup, trans-fats, and artificial additives. To accomplish their goal, they had to first convince the food supply community of the worth of investing in kids who don’t have access to healthy meals. By partnering with companies such as Whole Foods and a host of smaller local and regional producers that shared Revolution Foods’ principles, and that were willing to negotiate workable prices, Richmond and Tobey overcame a major hurdle. It wasn’t easy, however. “We struggle every day,” says Richmond. “Cost is an obstacle. Schools being able to invest in health and wellness, and having a policy behind that investment is necessary, but not something we have yet.” Working around certain aspects of current policy is also a challenge. For example, the National School Lunch Program’s reimbursement rate is the same for a kindergartener as for a 12th grader, despite the completely different nutritional needs of these two age groups.

Today, Revolution Foods serves 250 schools spread over four markets, including the San Francisco Bay Area, Southern California, Washington D.C., and Colorado. A cluster of four Aspire public schools in Los Angeles serving a predominantly Latino community recently signed on. The cluster was comprised of three elementary schools and one middle school (it has since added another elementary school), and 85 to 95 percent of students participated in the free and reduced lunch program. When Aspire’s Los Angeles Area Superintendent Dr. Roberta Benjamin arrived three years ago after 38 years with L.A. Unified School District, meals at the L.A. cluster schools were being catered by a popular local soul food restaurant. Many students were overweight, she observed, but

there wasn't much pressure to act. But after learning that some of their sister schools in northern California were using Revolution Foods, and given Aspire's academic focus and emphasis on “the whole child,” Dr. Benjamin decided to consider a change. “When Revolution Foods approached me, the idea of being much more conscious and having [nutrition and health] in the curriculum seemed like the right thing to do, no question,” she reports. “They knew it wasn’t going to be easy to change people’s eating habits, and they were very open to working with us on that.” Dr. Benjamin emphasized Revolution Foods' willingness to help her schools make the transition by providing hands-on support and education as key to success. “If we want them to come to a parent meeting and cater it with their food to let the parents know what kids are eating, they will do it.”

Still, the cost of doing business with Revolution Foods remains prohibitive for some schools for an array of reasons. For instance, although all are subject to the same federal reimbursement rate, school budgets can differ greatly. Some schools are more able to access grants or supplementary sources of funding that allow them to allocate more to health and wellness efforts. Schools may also charge non-subsidized students who opt in more for meals, which can make up the difference, especially in schools where these students make up a higher percentage of the overall student body—though Richmond notes that even full-pay students have strong budget constraints that may not permit schools to charge them much more than the subsidized rate. Finally, not all schools make health a priority, so even those with sufficient resources may choose to spend them elsewhere.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The story of Revolution Foods suggests that, by working with the food supply community and bringing them on board around some of the principles of health and wellness they already embrace, major economic obstacles to improving the quality of school food, especially in low-income communities, can be overcome. Despite this success, however, it appears that policy and financial constraints continue to limit schools' ability to access suppliers such as Revolution Foods, and may also deter similar would-be entrepreneurs from tackling the problem. Current policies have also shaped low expectations for public school children, leading to a sense of powerlessness among school staff and a belief that students' eating habits cannot be changed. A number of key points for policymakers to consider emerge here.

First, policymakers should start from the assumption that *policy shapes choice, not the other way around*. “If you're going to give me junk,” says Richmond, “I am going to choose junk. We can't mandate in the wrong direction where we have such low expectations of our kids that we keep the bar low.”

Second, *more federal funding for national school meal programs, and reimbursement rates tailored to the actual daily caloric needs of different age groups*, could allow more schools to access the services of companies like Revolution Foods, and strengthen the economic and social incentives for healthy food suppliers to make their products accessible to schools in need. The Revolution Foods model provides high-quality meals at a low cost of

around \$3 per meal. The health benefits of serving students nutritious foods far outweigh the \$0.32 margin, particularly when the public health costs of treating weight-related conditions such as diabetes are factored in.

Simply increasing the reimbursement rates won't necessarily guarantee better food in schools, however, unless schools are also incentivized not to redirect these additional funds. "School districts have a lot of pressure on them," notes Richmond. "That's why we need to *tie reimbursement increases to an increase in food quality and nutritional standards.*" In addition to better quality, Richmond emphasizes that food cannot just be better quality, but must be well-prepared so that resulting meals are appealing and delicious.

Finally, *education and inclusiveness are critical.* Revolution Foods' built-in educational component that goes beyond just delivering a new product was important to a successful transition at Aspire schools in Los Angeles. "I encourage folks to come to one of our schools," says Richmond. "I think that if you're taking the time and care to prepare something students design, if you're taking that approach, then you're going to see participation."

1 CONCLUSION

Kristin Richmond and Kirsten Tobey have pioneered and tested an innovative business model that makes bringing healthy, appetizing meals to underserved schools possible. Their successes and remaining challenges help illuminate for educators and policymakers what changes are needed to build on this emerging new infrastructure. This includes removing policy obstacles that bar the most disadvantaged schools from access to innovative new programs and services. Policies must also shift from a base of low expectations that potentially undermine the message these new initiatives are trying to send. Mandating higher basic standards for the food children consume at school *and* ensuring schools have the funding they need to meet these new standards would help encourage a more comprehensive shift in both the supply of, and demand for, healthy school meals.