



Through a Glass Narrowly: Media Coverage of the Child Nutrition Act and Related Issues

A FrameWorks Research Report

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Introduction

This analysis examines the ways in which the Child Nutrition Act is presented to readers, directly and indirectly, in the nation's newspapers. It identifies the main messengers used in news media on this topic, lays out the dominant frames that are commonly applied to the Child Nutrition Act and demonstrates how these frames may constrain public support for its re-authorization. Identifying media frames is an important step in FrameWorks' empirical measurement of public thinking about the Childhood Nutrition Act and about issues related to child nutrition more generally. In this report, we examine news coverage of the Child Nutrition Act during two periods: the lead up to and passage of reauthorization (January 1, 2004-December 31, 2004) and coverage of the Child Nutrition Act during the past year (May 2007 to May 2008). This report is distinct from, but complemented by, FrameWorks' examination of advocates' framing habits around child nutrition issues, as summarized in "Framing and Reframing Child Nutrition: A FrameWorks Research Report," August 2008. Both reports are supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

Summary of Findings

In this section, we summarize the important findings and implications that resulted from the media review.

Who are the Messengers?

- In 2004, non-profit advocates were largely left out of the media coverage of the Childhood Nutrition Act, although their presence appears to be improving in 2007-2008. Media coverage related to the Child Nutrition Act during the later period is thus far minimal, so it is difficult to predict how the issue will be framed in the media for the 2009 re-authorization.
- The dominant messengers in the media discussions of the reauthorization of the Childhood Nutrition Act in 2004 were industry representatives whose companies would be in some way impacted by the legislation; teachers, school administrators and others who work in school districts such as dietitians and nutritionists; and politicians. That is, the most visible messengers were those who could be viewed as heavily vested in the issue and who had some sort of political or financial interest in the passage of this legislation. Students in schools impacted by the legislation were also important messengers, although their parents and families were generally left out of the discussion.
- Non-profit advocates were also more likely to use frames that promoted public thinking about the systemic nature of poor child nutrition and community-wide solutions to the problems that are associated with it. They emphasized aspects of the legislation that were not addressed by other messengers and highlighted its wide-reaching impacts. At the same time, they also invoked many counter-productive frames. Non-profit advocates should take a larger role in media discussions of child nutrition in the lead up to the 2009 re-authorization, and ensure more systematic and intentional framing of these issues.

Frames Invoked

- Consistent with previous FrameWorks research on child and adolescent issues, media coverage of poor nutritional health among children resulted in a strong assignment of responsibility to parents. This occurred quite explicitly in the media frames included in this report, but also resulted from the notable absence of parents' perspectives about the Child Nutrition Act in the media. The focus on "bad" parents obscured the systemic and structural causes of poor child nutrition and contributes to public understandings of the goals of the Child Nutrition Act as monitoring, regulating and fixing individuals.
- The "imperiled child" was a dominant frame utilized in media coverage of the Child Nutrition Act. All of the messengers examined in this analysis rightfully emphasized the health problems that are associated with poor nutritional health. However, children's eating choices in these discussions became another "ever present hazard" that endangered them and threatened the stability of larger social systems. The "imperiled child" frame resulted in media coverage of the Child Nutrition Act that tended to focus on its regulatory aspects, like school wellness policies and the monitoring of children's diets, rather than the ways in which the legislation promotes child development.
- Schools were often framed as the *only* place where students' dietary choices could be effectively regulated and monitored. Many messengers, but particularly educational messengers, described schools as "bubbles" that must assume responsibility for students' nutritional health without involvement from their families or other members of their communities.
- While individual families were often assigned responsibility for poor child nutrition, the *consequences* of children's eating habits were not discussed in terms of the impacts on individual families or even on the development of individual children. Rather, news stories focused on how poor childhood nutrition was causing epidemic rates of childhood obesity and diabetes, as potentially destroying the U.S. health care system and even compromising U.S. national security. Rather than emphasizing the severity of the problems associated with poor nutrition, these stories invoked a "crisis frame," which in effect demonized families for their poor choices and prevented the public from imagining effective strategies for intervention. More crucially in the context of this legislation, the "crisis frame" could result in a lack of public understanding of the government's role in addressing issues related to poor childhood nutrition.
- The implementation of wellness policies at the school district level and, specifically, changes in vending machine options dominated news media coverage of reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act. The social justice aspects of the legislation and its potential to address issues related social inequality—providing healthy food for all students regardless of their background—were rarely addressed in the media.
- Although limited, media coverage in 2007-2008 highlighted potential problems with the Childhood Nutrition Act, which were not present in earlier coverage. These issues included the stigmatization of students who receive free lunches, hyper-focus on children's diets as promoting other eating disorders like anorexia or bulimia, the shifting of school resources from on-site kitchens and chefs to nutritionists and dieticians,

reducing the availability of fresh foods in schools, and potential food safety issues with USDA commodities.

Methods

FrameWorks reviewed 53 newspaper articles collected from newspapers in various parts of the country. Articles from January 1, 2004 to December 31, 2004 and from May 1, 2007 to May 31, 2007 were drawn from a range of news sources, both large newspapers and local papers as well as publications from a variety of political perspectives. New stories were drawn from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *USA Today*, *The Economist*, *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, *The Washington Times*, *The Maryland Gazette*, *The Ledger*, *South Bend Tribune*, *Chicago Daily Herald*, *Dayton Daily News*, among others.

The articles were identified by searching Lexis Nexis for the following terms: “child nutrition act,” “child nutrition legislation,” “childhood nutrition,” “school lunches,” and “child nutrition policy.” These search terms were searched in various combinations and various delimitations of the text string (e.g. “childhood nutrition” and legislation). There was relatively little coverage of the Child Nutrition Act during both periods. Therefore, the sample includes other articles that covered general issues around child nutrition in schools. However, the primary focus of this analysis is articles that dealt directly with the reauthorization and/or implementation of the legislation during 2004 and in the last year.

This analysis is not a quantitative look at the frequency of topics, for example, but a qualitative examination of how topics related to child nutrition are treated in the materials, and the likely implications for readers’ thinking. The analysis looks at such factors as the dominant messengers in news media, the types of topics that are and are not mentioned in a given article, the ways in which topics within a story are treated as either related or unrelated, the causal stories conveyed or implied by the articles, and so forth. The analysis is less about cataloguing what is explicitly said than it is about identifying the implicit understandings that are conveyed by the materials.

Much of the report is devoted to harmful patterns in the coverage of child nutrition—i.e. ways in which the coverage is likely to create counterproductive understandings in the minds of readers. However, we also discuss pieces that avoid these traps, since these positive examples can help guide advocates (and responsible journalists) to identify ways of providing more constructive framing.

Findings

In this section, we lay out the main messengers appearing in the media and the kinds of frames each messenger invoked. We focus on some of the counter-productive frames that shape patterns of thinking about legislation related to child nutrition. Previous FrameWorks research has demonstrated that the messengers of the frame are in some cases more important than the frame itself. In fact, frames can be reinforced or undermined depending on the choice of

messengers. FrameWorks has corroborated the assertions of other researchers that messengers must be perceived as knowledgeable and trustworthy; they are deemed credible by the public if they are not assumed to be biased towards a perspective. Furthermore, effective messengers convey the systemic connection of a social problem, underscore its severity, and promote solutions that are public in nature.¹

FrameWorks research about messengers is especially critical in media coverage of legislation in which many social actors have important financial and political interests that may or may not be apparent to the reading audience. Furthermore, what is defined as good nutrition is contested in public discourse and lay people are exposed to constant and often contradictory information about what constitutes healthy eating. In this context, it is perhaps of more importance that the messenger be knowledgeable and credible.

In this analysis, we found that corporate actors, politicians, people associated with the educational system, students, parents and non-profit advocates were the messengers commonly used in media discussions of the Child Nutrition Act in 2004 and in 2007-2008. Overall, the analysis revealed that industry representatives and people who work for the school districts in varying capacities were the dominant messengers who provided information about and commented on the Child Nutrition Act in the media. Politicians and students impacted by the legislation were also important messengers. Non-profit advocates were rarely quoted, although their presence appears to be improving in the 2007-2008 coverage of related topics. Finally, parents and families of school age children were largely left out of media discussions. Each type of messenger and the counter-productive and productive frames that they invoked will be discussed in turn in the following sections.

Corporate Messengers

In 2004, corporate actors and industry representatives were very visible messengers who advocated for the re-authorization of the Child Nutrition Act or commented on implementation after its passage. For example, one of the few op-eds concerning the Child Nutrition Act was written by a representative of the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association.

Congress approved and President Bush recently signed legislation to expand a fruit-and-vegetable pilot program as part of the Child Nutrition Act reauthorization. It pays for fresh fruits and vegetables to be made available in schools—sadly an option that does not happen enough. The first phase of the program, tested in a handful of states last year, was a terrific success, and exposed more healthy eating choices to thousands of young students. Florida’s fruit and vegetable growers obviously support the program because it promotes fresh-produce consumption (*The Ledger*, letter to the editor, Page A6, July 13, 2004).

¹ For an extended discussion about messengers as elements of the frame, see “Thinking Strategically About Framing,” <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/strategicanalysis/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf>

While the author brought attention to the benefits of the legislation, such as providing fresh fruits and vegetables to schools, the potential gain to his association could undermine the frame. He continued his letter by stressing the possible social outcomes, presenting the legislation as a solution to many layers of social problems.

The first phase of the program, tested in a handful of states last year, was a terrific success, and exposed more healthy eating choices to thousands of young students. Florida's fruit and vegetable growers obviously support the program because it promotes fresh-produce consumption. Health-care authorities say influencing young Americans' dietary choices now can go a long way toward reducing obesity and chronic diseases down the road—potentially stripping billions of dollars from our nation's burgeoning health care tab.

The frame utilized in this passage fails to give readers a concrete causal sequence whereby changes in the dietary options available to students will lead to improvements in U.S. health care system. The writer also stressed the benefits to childhood health, but ultimately emphasized the fiscal implications of poor childhood nutrition, which again may impact this messenger's credibility and imputed motive for advocating for the legislation. In another example, a journalist explained the benefits of changing the food options available in vending machines in schools, but also focused on how vending machines might profit from changes in school wellness policies.

Vendors have made changes to accommodate schools, said Craig Kushner, president of monumental Vending. "We had to go out and literally come up with a menu that would meet (Montgomery County) standards," said Mr. Kushner, whose company sells to numerous Maryland schools. "If they want to eat something now, it is nutritious." But some these nutritious items are also a little pricey. "You get what you pay for," Mr. Kushner said (*The Capital Annapolis Maryland*, by Christina Cepero, Section: Family Living, pg. C1, September 30, 2004).

Prior to and following the passage of the re-authorization of the Child Nutrition Act, many school districts replaced sodas with water, milk and juices. In one article discussing this shift, the first and primary messenger was a representative of the Dairy Industry.

Tired of being outshined by soda, old-fashioned milk is morphing into a more dazzling drink, flying across the counters at fast food restaurants after edging its way into school vending machines. Milk marketers have ditched the dull and clumsy cardboard cartons and simple flavors for flashy, colorful plastic bottles and strawberry, banana and root beer and other kid-friendly flavors. "We've made milk relevant to how kids live today," said Chris Moore, spokesman for Dairy Management Inc., a national organization that promotes dairy products ("Milk is fresh: Beverage gets flashy makeover to attract young drinkers" *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, by Raquel Rutledge, Section: Domestic News November 28, 2004).

Later in the article, the writer explained the role of the Child Nutrition Act in mandating this shift to healthier drinks in schools.

State Sen. Dave Hansen, D-Green Bay, takes some credit for getting milk vending machines in the schools. He co-sponsored legislation in 2002 that prohibits soft drink companies with exclusive school contracts from disallowing milk machines, as some had done in the past. The reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, signed into law in June, includes a similar provision.

This article highlighted the potential profits to the Dairy Industry as a result of the passage of both state and federal legislation related to nutrition in schools. It also intimated a close relationship between legislators and corporate actors. By leaving out nutrition specialists or people who advocate for childhood health without potential gains, these frames could again potentially undermine public understanding of the benefits of the legislation. Furthermore, the primary goal of one corporate messenger was to find better ways to market milk, including root beer-flavored milk, which may not be considered as healthier than other beverages for some readers.

Corporate messengers identified many of the potential benefits of the Child Nutrition Act and, in at least one example, used the editorial page to disseminate information about its benefits beyond school districts. However, emphasis on how to market healthy foods to children or on the financial incentives for the legislation could undermine their credibility as messengers interested in improving childhood nutritional health and, even more importantly, define the issue as a political football.

Politicians as Messengers

Politicians, particularly those who were involved in the passage of the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act or similar types of legislation at the state and local levels, were also dominant messengers. Politicians can be effective messengers, but in some news stories, their potential political and/or financial gains were emphasized, rather than the benefits of the legislation for students' health.

U.S. Rep. Judy Biggert, a Republican from Clarendon Hills, said the hype about childhood obesity and its correlation to diabetes and heart disease should help schools get some of what's on their wish lists. She expects to see slightly more than last year's \$11.4 billion divided up among the states under the Child Nutrition Act expected to be reauthorized in the next few weeks. "This is the right moment," Biggert said ("Experts pay more attention to what kids eat," *Chicago Daily Herald*, pg. 4, March 16, 2004).

This congresswoman spoke of the "hype" about diseases associated with poor childhood nutrition. In this passage, she portrayed school districts as opportunistic, exploiting public fears related to childhood health. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the following politician emphasized the severity of student's poor nutritional health and exercise habits, but invoked a frame in which the patterns that begin in childhood directly and irreversibly resulted in poor eating and exercise habits in adults.

Washington is by no means alone. As D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton pointed out yesterday, “Participation in high school physical education classes has dropped from 42 percent in 1991 to 33 percent in 2005, accounting for at least part of the reason that one-third of young people in grades 9-12 do not regularly engage in physical activities. National data shows an increase in unhealthy eating habits for adults and no change in physical activity.” (“Childhood obesity,” *The Washington Times*, Editorials A10, September 8, 2007).

In this excerpt, there is no model or causal sequence used so that readers can understand the relationship between the decrease in physical education classes and data which reflects poor exercise and eating habits of adults. More generally, presenting information about the health impacts of poor childhood nutrition as “hype” or as insurmountable problem, leaves little space for policy solutions in which broad sections of the public can be encouraged to take an active part.

Some politicians emphasized the broader implications of the legislation and specifically how the re-authorization of 2004 provided resources to get many parts of the community involved in ensuring good childhood nutrition, as the following excerpt demonstrates.

Upton, R-St. Joseph, introduced his “Farm to cafeteria” bill in June. Upton’s legislation creates a six-year, \$10 million a year grant program and would provide grant funds of up to \$100,000 per school district establish “farm to cafeteria” programs. Grants will help schools purchase equipment, provide staff training, conduct menu planning, locate sources of locally produced food, purchase food and develop food and farm education programs such as farm visits and school gardens” (*South Bend Tribune*, Local pg. D3, March 26, 2004).

Again, the political gain for this politician after securing resources to what appears to be a wide array of his constituents might undercut the importance of the implemented changes. However, discussing how legislation related to child nutrition can be used to benefit many people in the community is important for securing political support from those who may not think childhood nutrition impacts their lives. Had the other messengers been supportive of these changes, the political calculus might have been overcome.

Educational Messengers

Dietitians, nutritionists, administrators in local school districts and in state and federal departments of education were also primary messengers in media coverage regarding the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act. These are important messengers because they are knowledgeable about the impacts of poor nutrition on children’s educational achievement as well as the promises of and potential pitfalls in the implementation of the legislation. Some of the frames they used in describing the legislation, however, were not conducive to public understanding of the *systemic* nature of ensuring child nutritional health.

Previous FrameWorks research has shown that the “family bubble” is a dominant assumption in the public’s ideas about parenting. This frame supports patterns of thinking that child rearing occurs in the family and things that occur outside that family are irrelevant. Media coverage of

the Child Nutrition Act has the potential to challenge the “family bubble” frame and consider how other members of a child’s community are important for their healthy mental and physical development. Furthermore, FrameWorks researchers have shown that the public is often more supportive of government action related to public health when contextualized within school settings. Schools are important places from which the people can imagine public solutions to what are imagined to be individual problems. However, educational messengers in the news media rarely talked about schools as public institutions. Rather, they argued for the necessity of the Child Nutrition Act by framing schools as “bubbles” that must assume sole responsibility for children’s nutritional health and protect them from the poor habits of their parents.

This frame was constructed first by painting pictures of parents who fail to ensure their children’s nutritional health.² Working parents, for example, were held responsible for children’s poor nutrition. Changing children’s diets becomes the responsibility of their childcare providers by default.

“Obesity has been in the news so much,” said Goering, a dietitian. “I know that good healthy eating habits start when kids are young.” Child care providers are role models for the children they are caring for, Goering said. “Working parents don’t have much time to do cooking,” Goering said. “What they are exposed to in the child care program is so important” (“Nebraska May Test Child Nutrition Program,” *Associated Press Online*, by Josefina Loza, Section Domestic News, June 23, 2004).

This frame persisted in the 2007-2008 coverage of the Child Nutrition Act as exemplified by the following editorial written by an anonymous source.

The news that nearly one in four DC children age 10-17 is obese should worry every district resident. This is the highest child obesity rate in the nation. We will be paying for the resultant health maladies one way or another in due time, from hospitals to Medicaid to Medicare rolls to the sheer quality of life of the District. Acknowledging this is no act of nanny-statism. A reasonable position begins here: Government is no solution to this problem because health begins at home, where public attitudes must shift. But insofar as government can contribute, public schools are front and center (*The Washington Times*, Editorials A10, September 8, 2007).

Rather than lack of availability of fresh, inexpensive food, bad parents are understood as responsible for poor child nutrition and its concomitant health and social problems. Schools must again pick up their slack. It is important to note that even in this politically conservative newspaper, schools are identified as an appropriate place for government action adding support to FrameWorks research mentioned above.

² FrameWorks research has consistently shown that in public discourse about related to issues concerning children and adolescents, responsibility for their problems is typically assigned to poor parenting (see FrameWorks MessageMemos on both topics at www.frameworksinstitute.org).

The above excerpts demonstrate that educational messengers invoked what FrameWorks contributor Frank Gilliam has identified as the “imperiled child” frame in which children are portrayed as constantly endangered by their peers, parents, caretakers and the larger environment.³ Gilliam demonstrates that this frame is prevalent in media coverage of issues related to childhood health and his insights are very applicable to media coverage of child nutrition.

Among other issues that Gilliam has identified, one problem with this frame is that it promotes policy discussions that are focused on how to contain risks to children and regulate their activities, rather than the potential benefits to their development or enrichment. This tendency can be seen in the almost exclusive focus on schools’ development of wellness guidelines and policies in media coverage of the Child Nutrition Act. Again, the media promoted the idea that the only place where students’ diets can be effectively regulated is within the “school bubble.” In the following excerpt, a school dietician in the District of Columbia described the role of educators in shaping students eating habits.

Miss Adams said the upcoming changes are part of a request by school board members to provide “overall healthier eating options” in the District’s roughly 150 schools, not including specialty schools and programs. “They don’t want to make snacks a substitute for school breakfasts and lunches,” she said. “We’ll give students two things: healthier options and an impact on their behavior. When they leave the buildings, we hope they will either go out and choose [healthier foods] or to start to recognize their options. You [affect] behavior by the examples you set” (“Childhood Obesity,” *The Washington Times*, By Arlo Wagner, Metropolitan pg B01, October 1, 2004).

In this passage, parents were not mentioned and the educators’ influence stopped once the children left the building. The next passage invokes a similar frame; parental involvement is not considered and therefore schools become the de facto site for effective intervention. But it is important to recognize that in loco parentis is not a substitute for systems thinking.

Bednarek asked whether the district has a responsibility to educate students on good nutrition and encourage good behavior. “Although this does not prevent a child of any age from purchasing highly sugared drinks or soda once they leave school, I do think we have a responsibility as their caretakers during school hours to try and do what we believe is in their interest,” Dungee Glenn said (“Sodas banned in Phila. Schools; Water, milk and fruit juice are the only beverages to be sold to students. The district policy is one of the toughest.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, by Susan Snyder, Pg B01, February 5, 2004).

The more regulatory aspects of the Child Nutrition Act were emphasized by the following educational messenger who described the legislation as “mandating good nutrition.”

³ See E-zine issue #22 “A New Dominant Frame: ‘The Imperiled Child’”
<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue22framing.shtml>

In June, Congress amended the Child Nutrition Act to require that school systems draft wellness policies that set dietary guidelines for all foods and lay out nutrition education and physical activity goals, beginning July 1, 2006. The state considered setting standards for school-snack items, but has held off so far. “It is very difficult to legislate or mandate good nutrition,” said Kim Kerry of the Maryland State Department of Education. “We have been working with a number of schools, really wrestling with it, to see if we can give the systems a tool they can use.” (*The Capital Annapolis Maryland*, by Christina Cepero, Section: Family Living, pg C1, September 30, 2004).

Gilliam argues that the “imperiled child” frame is emerging in the news media where images of the “problem child” once dominated. In discussions of child nutrition, the “problem child” frame was also present, at times in the same story. Educational messengers in particular also tended to focus on how schools were responsible for the provision of healthy options, but ultimately children were responsible for choosing healthier food. Media coverage of childhood nutrition is indeed a unique venue in which children are treated as fully developed people, entrusted to make decisions that impact their lives without supervision. However, they are simultaneously held responsible for their ill nutrition and health. For example, in the following excerpt, the director of food and nutrition services for Montgomery County public schools discussed students’ role in their nutritional decisions.

Some students are upset about the changes—especially the one that mandates machines with snacks not meeting federal guidelines be shut off until after lunch. The students say “if they are old enough to drive, then they are old enough to choose what to eat,” Miss Lazor said (“Childhood Obesity,” *The Washington Times*, by Arlo Wagner, Metropolitan pg B01, October 1, 2004).

In a more sympathetic tone, the following educational messengers talked about “trusting” students to make good choices, which is a more productive way to frame students’ role and agency in their health decisions.

Voting in opposition were Daniel Whelan, a Schweiker appointee, and Martin Bednarek, a Street appointee, who said students should be able to choose. They said they doubted the ban would help with obesity and that the district instead should upgrade its physical-education program. “A calorie’s a calorie. It does not matter where you get them, from milk or fruit juice or sodas,” Whelan said. “The policy we adopt today sends a strong message that we don’t trust our high school students with a simple decision as to whether to consume a soda” (“Sodas banned in Phila. Schools; Water, milk and fruit juice are the only beverages to be sold to students. The district policy is one of the toughest.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Susan Snyder, Pg B01, February 5, 2004).

Educational messengers stressed the enormous scale of the problems that result from poor child nutrition, but often discussed the problems in terms of irreversible cycles.

Only 2 percent of kids today meet the government’s food pyramid guidelines for a balanced diet, with fewer than one in five getting enough fruits and vegetables.

It's no wonder obesity rates among children in the United States have doubled in the past 20 years. According to the American Diabetic Association, at least 10 percent of preschoolers and 15 percent of children 6 to 11 are overweight, putting them at risk of health and self-esteem problems not to mention what could be a lifelong battle with weight. "One of the biggest factors of being overweight as an adult is being overweight as a child," says Christina Economou, an assistant professor at Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Public Policy. "It's very difficult to reverse" ("Home Plate—Doctors dieticians, school districts and 'sanctimommies' all have opinions about what you should feed your kids. So what should you feed them?" *The Boston Globe*, The Magazine, pg. 30 July 8, 2007).

Taken together, poor child nutrition is framed by educational messengers as a problem that begins with bad parents who work too much and endanger their children. Schools are now the only place where these problems can be redressed, but ultimately students are responsible for making good eating decisions. Not only are children and family assigned responsibility for their ill-health, but they also are blamed for larger social problems.

Experts connected with the educational system are important messengers in public discussions about the Childhood Nutrition Act. However, by explicitly and implicitly blaming parents for their lack of involvement, invoking the "imperiled child" and "problem child" frames, creating a "school bubble" and focusing on the regulatory and in some cases punitive dimensions of the Child Nutrition Act, educational messengers promoted individualistic understandings of the causes of poor child nutrition. Furthermore, the frames they invoked can lead to potential solutions that are imagined to occur in one domain or bubble of a child's life, rather than solutions that involve parents, educators and entire communities working together and changing the systemic causes of poor child nutrition. Again, FrameWorks research has indicated the salience of school involvement in ensuring good health for children. But schools should be framed as a very important site to promote of child development and enhancement, rather than a haven that protects children from bad parents. Finally, although a minor point, educational experts, and particularly dieticians and nutritionists are not completely disinterested messengers; the Child Nutrition Act increases resources for school districts' nutritional efforts and has increased the presence of dieticians and nutritionists in the school districts and in public discourse about child nutrition more generally. Although the coverage is minimal, this point is beginning to receive attention in 2007-2008 news stories (see section below).

Student Messengers

Students themselves were also important messengers in the media regarding the impacts of the re-authorized Child Nutrition Act. Students' voices were used in new stories primarily to discuss whether or not they liked the changes to schools nutritional policies and the new foods that were made available to them; thus, as consumers, not as citizens. Stories focused on students' positive or negative responses to their food options, as the two following excerpts demonstrate.

Thirteen-year-old Kyle Wagner said he likes having the option of drinking milk during the day. “I buy it about once a week,” said Wagner, an eighth grader at Eisenhower Middle School in New Berlin, Wis. “I like the taste” (“Milk is Fresh: Beverage gets a flashy makeover to attract young drinkers,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, by Raquel Rutledge, Section: Domestic News, November 28, 2004).

When Sherwood High sophomore Tiffany Simon went to buy Famous Amos chocolate chip cookies during gym class on the first day of school, they were missing from the vending machine. So were GrandMa’s Homestyle Fudge Chocolate Chip Big Cookies, the Starburst Fruit Chews, the sour cream and onion chips. The Skittle’s the Snickers bars and the Reese’s peanut butter cups were gone, along with the sodas. In their place was an array of healthy snacks—granola bars, peanuts, pretzels, plain popcorn, trail mix, baked chips, beef jerky, peanut-butter crackers. Sodas were replaced by milk, water and fruit juice. Tiffany went with the ginger snaps. “It had ‘fat-free’ or something on it,” she said. “They were nasty too” (“Schools promote healthy snacks,” *The Maryland Gazette*, by Christina Cepero, Section: Family Living, pg C1, September 30, 2004).

Although not dealing with the direct impacts of the Child Nutrition Act, in November 2004 the *New York Times* printed an article regarding changes to nutritional policy in a private school.

Soon after he was hired to cook healthy food in the cafeteria in the Calhoun School, a private school on the Upper West Side, Robert W. Surlis, better known as Chef Bobo, decided that one of the first symbolic acts would be to ban ketchup. The children would never learn to appreciate fine natural food, he reasoned, if they kept smothering it in a sauce that masquerades as a vegetable. At Halloween, a middle school showed up dressed as a ketchup bottle with a sign around her neck: “Please put Me on the Menu.” What to do? Ketchup is back on the menu at Calhoun, but only once a month, and only organic (“At Private Schools, Healthier Food Wins Favorable Reviews (Mostly)” *The New York Times*, by Anemona Hartocollis, Section B; Column 1, Metropolitan Desk pg 4 November 26, 2004).

Rather than limiting public discussions to their food preferences, students can be used as much more effective messengers of many of the issues that are related to child nutrition and the Child Nutrition Act. This appears to be happening in the later coverage of the Act. For example, the following article discussed some of the issues that are involved in providing free and/or subsidized lunches in schools that move beyond the availability of certain foods.

Although Francisco Velazquez, a 14-year old freshman with spiky hair and sunglasses qualified for a free lunch at Balboa high school here, he was not eating. He scanned the picnic table full of his friends in a school courtyard one day a few weeks ago, and said “I’m not hungry.” On another day, a group of classmates who also qualify for federally subsidized lunches sat on a bench. One ate a slice of pizza from the line where students pay for food; the rest went without. Lunchtime “is the best time to impress your peers,” says Lewis Geist, a

senior at Balboa and its student body president. Being seen with a subsidized meal, he said “lowers your status.” San Francisco officials are looking at ways to encourage more poor students to accept government-financed meals, including the possibility of introducing cashless cafeterias where all students are offered the same food choices and use debit cards or punch in codes on a keypad so that all students check out at the cashier in the same manner (“Free School Lunch Isn’t Cool, So Some Students Go Hungry,” *The New York Times*, by Carol Pogash, Section A Column 0; National Desk page 1, March 1, 2008).

By talking to students in a meaningful way, this journalist identified other factors besides bad parents or students’ poor dietary choices that contribute to poor nutrition. In this case, stigmatization as a result of social inequality shaped students’ food choices. This article also addressed an issue about childhood nutrition that has not received much media attention: poor nutrition as the result of children not eating enough food. While childhood obesity and diabetes fit into the public’s ideas of America’s abundance of food, less understandable is that hunger occurs with predictable regularity in this country. It is important that the aspects of the 2004 and 2009 reauthorization acts that address these inequalities receive further media attention.

Parents

For the most part, parents were not included in public discussions of the impacts of the Child Nutrition Act. This notable absence in effect reinforced the “school bubble” and prohibited public thinking about solutions that integrate all of the people who are involved in ensuring good nutrition for students. Their absence also helped support frames that ascribed responsibility for poor childhood nutrition to parents.

In the *New York Times* article referenced above regarding the changes in nutrition policy in private schools in 2004, the journalist interviewed a number of parents about their opinions regarding changes to nutritional policy in the school. While the sample of articles reporting on nutrition policies in private schools was not large enough to draw any definite conclusions, it is interesting that this was one of the few articles where parents’ voices were prominent. The journalist began by describing food choices as yet another “ever present hazard” involved in rearing children, invoking the “imperiled child” frame. Protecting children from potentially dangerous food was again framed as the primary, if not solitary, responsibility of parents. The following mother worried about the hyper focus on children’s eating habits in schools and argued that children’s eating habits should be established in their homes.

Some cynics said they missed the full-moon doughnuts and thought concerns about obesity were misplaced in private school. “I feel as if everybody puts too much guilt on things like sweets,” said a mother who asked not to be named for fear of repercussions. “I think parents want to try to fob that responsibility off on their school, when they really should just sort of examine eating habits and the whole concept of moderation” (“At Private Schools, Healthier Food Wins Favorable Reviews (Mostly)” *The New York Times*, by Anemona Hartocollis, Section B; Column 1, Metropolitan Desk pg 4, November 26, 2004).

This passage reflects the idea that childhood obesity is not an issue of concern for more privileged students and perhaps school districts. Therefore, people who are not directly impacted may not think about the implications of the Child Nutrition Act for their larger communities. At the same time, the article does not implicitly state but suggests that the changes mandated by the Child Nutrition Act had wider repercussions than simply the changes to nutritional policies in public schools.

When paying \$700 to \$1,000 a year just for meals (compared with \$315 a year in public school), as one parent put it, a certain level of quality is expected. Clara Rubio, whose daughter attended kindergarten last year at St. Hilda's but has switched to a public school (not, she stresses, because of the food), has been one of the more outspoken parents. Growing up in Madrid, Ms. Rubio, a children's fashion designer, had been raised with European-style public school meals, with several courses, one hour to eat and one hour to play afterward. I was comparing Europe to America, and saying this is why America has a bad reputation about eating, Ms. Rubio said, "because it's true."

This excerpt highlights the lack of resources for public schools to ensure good nutrition in comparison with other schools. The parent interviewed for the article also focused on other aspects of childhood nutrition that are not connected to the nutritional quality of food itself: students should be given enough time to eat their meals.

Non-Profit Advocates

Like parents, non-profit advocates working outside of school districts were under-utilized messengers in the 2004 coverage, although this appears to be improving in the 2007-2008 coverage. While non-profit advocates were the messengers who most often used productive frames, they also relied on frames that may not increase public understanding of the social and systemic dimensions of the causes and consequences of poor childhood nutrition.

Non-profit advocates emphasized the severity of the problems associated with poor child nutrition and the necessity of immediate public response to these issues. However, without effective causal sequences and by invoking language such as "crisis" and "epidemic," they were perhaps inadvertently framing the problem as too large and too widespread for effective and meaningful intervention. For example, the following advocate discussed the health problems that are associated with childhood nutrition as well as the mechanisms by which children develop poor eating habits.

The combination of obesity and inactivity is fast overtaking tobacco as the No. 1 cause of preventable heart failure. Experts expect that it will become No. 1 if schools and parents don't join together to break the habits of poor eating and avoiding exercise. The bad habits start early and with the first meal of the day. "Both parents are working and leaving the house earlier and earlier so no one is there telling them to eat," said Connie Probst, director of Illinois Hunger Coalition. "Or the food is there but the child gets up at the last minute because they played sports late the night before." Whatever the reason, educators say they

are seeing more and more children come to class without breakfast. That leads to lethargy, headaches and poor concentration impede students learning. If they don't eat breakfast, they can't learn," Probst said. "And if you don't eat breakfast, what do you do for the rest of the day? You binge."

This advocate first presented data about the severity of the problem—poor childhood nutrition will lead to increased rates of preventable heart failure. She argues that poor eating habits begin early both in the life cycle and in the day, implying that once children develop poor eating and exercise habits, it is potentially an irreversible cycle. Furthermore, in this narrative, working parents are held responsible for their lack of involvement in students' nutrition, similar to frames invoked by educational messengers. Framing the problem of poor childhood nutrition as such leaves little room for any kind of community interventions and little hope that the situation can change.

Furthermore, some advocates connected poor childhood nutrition to social problems that may not be easily linked for readers.

Ms. Rubin formed an advocacy group, Better School Food, whose membership has grown to 750 in two years. In her office last month, days before a screening in Fairfield Conn.—another is scheduled this fall at the Jacob Burns Film center in Pleasantville—Ms. Rubin addressed what she hopes parents will take away from the movie: that students are at the mercy of schools that are harming their health, impairing their ability to learn and jeopardizing their economic future. "This is a national security issue," she said. "Without adequate nutrition, we will not have future leaders" ("Two mothers, a Camera and a Look at Lunch" *The New York Times*, By Juli S. Charkes, Section 14WC Column 1, June 3, 2007).

This excerpt again utilized the "imperiled child" frame, although schools rather than parents were identified as hazardous to children's health. Connecting poor child nutrition to national security also creates a crisis frame in which the problem appears too big for the public to imagine potential solutions.

Despite these counter-productive frames, non-profit advocates were the messengers who most often invoked more productive frames. First, they voiced their concerns about the relationship between government and industry, not only making them more credible messengers, but also pointing out potential problems in the implementation of public policy. For example, one article from 2004 in *The Washington Post* reported the results of a series of recommendations made by the National Academy of Sciences to combat the epidemic of childhood obesity. Some commentators, particularly academics, noted the problems of imposing voluntary industry standards and the problematic relationship between government organizations and industry.

Beato added that the department has begun work on a number of the other recommendations, including urging the food industry to take voluntary action and ordering the FDA to update food labels. The recommendations were generally praised by both anti-obesity advocates and industry representatives. "The report is thoughtful and well-reasoned," said Kelly Brownell of Yale University's Center for Eating and Weight Disorders "But we've got an emergency on our hands, and

I believe the science is robust enough to suggest taking more bold action.” The committee should, for example, have recommended moving the power to set federal nutritional policy from the Agricultural Department, which is too cozy with the food industry to the CDC, he said. Marion Nestle, a nutrition expert at New York University, agreed. She praised the report overall but criticized the committee for not calling for mandatory action (“Report urges Nationwide Campaign to Combat Childhood Obesity,” *The Washington Post*, by Rob Stein, Section A16, October 1, 2004).

In another example, a non-profit advocate countered the opinion of an industry representative.

Ronald Wilson, president of the Philadelphia-based Coca-Cola Bottling Co., said his company was still interested in working with the district but was disappointed with the decision. “We think it is bad science and bad math,” he said, adding that only one percent of the district’s drink sales are sodas. He complained that proponents of the policy had unfairly made his company the “culprit” for childhood obesity when the lack of physical activity was to blame. But Duane Perry, executive director of the Food Trust, a nutrition advocacy group, praised the decision. “It is great that the Philadelphia School District has enacted a policy that will result in children learning and modifying their behavior” (“Sodas banned in Phila. Schools; Water, milk and fruit juice are the only beverages to be sold to students. The district policy is one of the toughest,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Susan Snyder, Pg B01, February 5, 2004).

Non-profit advocates also tended to emphasize multiple aspects of the legislation and not simply changes to schools’ wellness policies and vending machine options.

A federal nutrition program that could be tested in Nebraska would help people providing child care in rural areas expand their food service, Sen. Ben Nelson said Tuesday. The Child and Adult Care Food program is expected to help with subsidized meals and snacks for families in need. Nelson requested that the pilot program be created during the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry’s reauthorization of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act and Child Nutrition Act of 1966...Lynn Goering, program coordinator at Lincoln’s Family Service, said the program could help more child care providers in homes and child care centers qualify for higher reimbursement rates known as Tier I and benefit from nutrition education (“Nebraska May Test Child Nutrition Program,” *Associated Press Online*, by Josefina Loza, Section Domestic News, June 23, 2004).

The above excerpt effectively utilized a politician and advocate as messengers to emphasize issues of social inequality. Finally, in one example, a non-profit advocate discussed the range of actors that are required to plan and implement changes to ensure good child nutrition.

“Parents and families acting alone cannot reverse the climbing rates of obesity. Changes are needed in our schools and in communities, as well as the national

level.” (“Report urges Nationwide Campaign to Combat Childhood Obesity,” *The Washington Post*, by Rob Stein, Section A16, October 1, 2004).

In the context of legislation related to child nutrition, non-profit advocates have been and should continue to be used as effective messengers because they are knowledgeable and trustworthy. Unlike corporate and educational messengers, they do not appear to directly benefit from the reauthorization of the legislation. It is difficult to predict how media coverage will take shape in the lead up to the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act in 2009 because thus far, there has been very little national media attention to the issue. As noted above, when non-profit advocates are messengers, the frames they invoke appear to be more likely to increase public understanding of the causes and potential solutions to poor child nutrition.

Lessons from 2007-2008 Coverage

Although preliminary, it seems that more recent coverage tends to be more critical of the legislation or at least raise issues related to the reauthorization that were not addressed in 2004. First, some observers are raising concerns over the safety of USDA commodities for use in school lunches.

Just as consumers are paying more for staples, so are schools. Though they often use long-term contracts to lock in low prices, cafeteria directors say they’re still seeing double-digit cost increases over last year: a 12% increase for bread, 13% for rice and pasta, 15% for cheese and 17% for milk. That, coupled with revelations that one of the biggest beef suppliers for the National School Lunch program was forcing cows that couldn’t walk into a slaughterhouse, has critics saying it’s time to change how the program works (“The real cost of a cheap lunch; Critics say it’s time for fresh ideas on USDA commodities,” *USA Today* by Greg Toppo, *Life* pg. 1D, May 1, 2008).

Other articles noted that the hyper-focus on children’s eating may lead to other eating disorders, such as anorexia and/or bulimia. News articles in 2007-2008 were beginning to discuss the boundaries between public discussions of healthy eating and promoting diets that may be harmful.

Slowly, the message is trickling through. Tune into PBS these days, and you’re likely to see singing vegetables alongside Cookie Monster, brought to you by new sponsors like Earth’s Best organic baby food in addition to McDonald’s. At Disney theme parks, kids’ meals now include a choice of carrots or grapes instead of fries. Some parents especially those with teenage girls, fear that too much of “thin is in” mantra may inadvertently send a pro-anorexia message. Authorities say the key is to avoid insulting or excessively complimenting young girls’ appearance. Instead, focus on achieving a healthy weight and emphasize that a “healthy” number on the scale may be different for everyone (“Home Plate—Doctors dieticians, school districts and ‘sanctimommies’ all have opinions about what you should feed your kids. So what should you feed them?” *The Boston Globe*, *The Magazine*, pg. 30, July 8, 2007).

The “sanctimommies” referred to in the title of the article is a term used for mothers who are over-vigilant of their children’s food intake and judgmental of other parents. In this *Boston Globe* article, the author writes “some parents wonder if the pendulum has swung too far to the so-called sanctimommies,” indicating some amount of backlash to increased focus on child nutrition and some of the moralistic tones this discourse can engender. This echoes a common identity assigned to food reformers in media as elitists, over-protectionist or ‘food police.’

Finally, some observers note that the Child Nutrition Act increases funding for nutritionists and dieticians in schools to plan and implement wellness policies, but as a result, funding has been cut for school chefs and operating kitchens. These budgetary changes mean that fresh food cannot be prepared on site. As a result, more processed foods are made available in the school cafeteria.

Conclusion

The Childhood Nutrition Act has impacted and will continue to impact many people, from students and their families, educators, school administrators, politicians, and various local and national industries, to name a few. The variety of messengers that have been present in news media about the legislation is important, given its range. Non-profit advocates, however, have a unique position in this discussion. They are knowledgeable and trustworthy messengers in this domain, without financial or political motive for advocating for children’s nutritional health. However, this analysis also reveals very few op-eds published on the topic of re-authorization of the Childhood Nutrition Act in 2004 and 2007-2008. This a definite venue where non-profit advocates can increase their presence and contribute to public thinking about the problems associated with poor childhood nutrition and potential solutions.

Furthermore, students and their parents are also under-utilized messengers in news coverage of the re-authorization of the Childhood Nutrition Act during both periods. Relying only on nutritional experts to frame public debate could potentially send messages to the public that ordinary people should not be involved with policy decisions regarding their children’s food choices. This may alienate them from engaging in the problems related to poor nutritional health among children.

FrameWorks’ research advises that advocates choose messengers who reinforce the systemic nature of social problems. In this analysis, we have shown how all of the messengers, but most often educational messengers, tend to blame parents as solely responsible for children’s poor eating habits. This frame obscures the systemic issues that may contribute to poor childhood health, such as food availability or work schedules that do not accommodate parents with small children, for example. In this frame, the schools become the only place where poor childhood nutrition can be addressed. Furthermore, solutions that involve the cooperation between school districts and students’ families cannot be imagined. More productive frames would allow the public to think about schools as a productive site to address issues of child nutrition but in partnerships with families. News media typically failed to present issues related to child nutrition as systemic in need of community-wide solutions.

FrameWorks’ research also suggests that effective issue advocacy must couple a realistic assessment of the severity of the problem with solutions. Most messengers in the articles examined for this analysis connected poor child nutrition to diseases, poor adult health and to even larger social problems. However, by invoking crisis and “doomed cycle” language, problems related to poor childhood nutrition can appear insurmountable and irreversible. For example, if healthy eating habits must begin when children are very young, why waste public resources on high school students who are already “doomed” to poor nutrition and ill health? Effective and productive frames will reinforce the severity of the problem, but in a way that allows the public to readily envision solutions and interventions at any stage of a student’s educational career. .

Finally, the Childhood Nutrition Act is an important piece of public policy that aims to ameliorate vast inequalities among school-age children. Most of the media coverage about the Act focuses on its impacts of addressing health issues connected with over-eating like obesity and diabetes that disproportionately affect poor children. But this legislation also ensures that students who might not otherwise have food will have it when they are attending school. The health-education link is something that Americans tend not to think about it, but it exists and is addressed by the Child Nutrition Act.

About the Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a national nonprofit think tank devoted to framing public issues to bridge the divide between public and expert understandings. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis™, a multi-method, multi-disciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, commissions, publishes, explains and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues – the environment, government, race, children’s issues and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth – from qualitative, quantitative and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, advertising campaigns, workshops, FrameChecks, and Study Circles around the country. See www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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