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# The School Lunch Programme

**W**HAT do children most enjoy about school? That sounds like a loaded question—like asking a child what he enjoys most about going to a dentist. But when Japan's elementary schoolchildren were asked that question they had a ready answer the school lunch.

Just about every elementary school in Japan serves lunches to its pupils. When the noon hour rolls around, pupils on lunch duty bring the meals from the kitchen into the classroom. Wearing white aprons they lay out the lunch, including the main course and bread. When all are seated before their meals, the children chant in unison, "Itadaki-nasu" (a courteous phrase asking permission to eat) Teachers dine together with their pupils. When everyone is finished, they pile their dishes together and the duty pupils remove them to the kitchen.

Other countries have similar lunch programmes. But the distinguishing feature about this system in Japan is that it is treated as an integral part of the school education programme.

Japan's school lunch system began in the early postwar era when Japan's defeat left the country suffering a severe food shortage. In 1946 the school lunch programme was initiated with the assistance of the U.S. Occupation Headquarters to feed the hungry, undernourished schoolchildren. This lunch programme was launched in the elementary schools in the Tokyo area and spread the following year, with the assistance of LARA, (Licensed Agency for Relief in Asia) to the entire country. Lunches consisted of skin milk and a non-staple dish. Parents augmented it at their discretion and according to their resources

In Japan, the school lunch programme plays an important role in children's education. Today, more than 10 million children eat school lunches at 25,000 elementary schools throughout Japan.

with food from home.

In 1950 the United States government released stocks of wheat through GARIOA (Government Account for Relief in Occupied Areas), opening the way for full-scale school lunches (bread and milk as well as main-course dishes).

When the San Francisco Peace Treaty was signed terminating allied Occupation of Japan the GARIOA programme also ended threatening an end as well to the school lunch programme. But parents clamored so loudly for its continuation that the Japanese government enacted the school lunch system into law.

A justifying argument for this move was that the school lunch programme had an educational function as well as its role of protecting the health and welfare of the children. By taking turns serving food, the children were learning the rules of group life. The school lunch became one link in the school education programme. One by-product was to discourage the children's likes and dislikes in food.

Today, more than 10 million children eat school lunches at 25,000 elementary schools throughout Japan. In the city of Yokohama alone, there are 327 city-operated schools. They prepare a minimum of 250,000 lunches every day. The cost to parents is Yen 2,900 (\$18) per month, an amount which would pay for only five ordinary lunches outside the school.

The system works in one of three

different ways (1) A large central kitchen prepares food which a center distributes to the various schools (2) Schools prepare their own menu and meals and (3) The local education board prepares the menu and the schools prepare the lunch on the basis of the menu.

In Yokohama, the city dietitians prepare the menu and the schools prepare their own meals. Dishes popular with children are curried rice, spaghetti and hamburger steaks.

Recently, school authorities are being forced to review the contents of the lunch diet because of an increase in adult illnesses among children. One cause is the increase in intake of sweets and fatty foods among children as family incomes improve and life styles change. The result has been an increase in overweight children and as one by-product, an increase in high blood pressure as well. These developments combined with a lack of exercise, are factors which have contributed to the increase in adult ailments among schoolchildren.

Many countries have sent inspection groups to Japan to study its school lunch programme. But along with the many good points about the programme; it is also true that there exist a number of internal problems as well. One concerns the school lunch center. These centers were created to take advantage of the low costs gained by concentrating food preparation in a central kitchen.

However because of the distances and times involved in delivering the food, hot foods tend to become cold and lose their flavor by the time are served. Because of the large quantities of food prepared and to simplify the work, menus tend to become monotonous and lack variety. Moreover, the time allowed for lunch is only 50 minutes Subtract the time required for serving and cleaning up afterward, and this leaves the children only 20 minutes for eating. Moreover, in addition to all this, questions are being asked about the use of additives and the freshness of the food used at these centers.

Solving these problems requires, first of all equipment and cash, both of which are limited. In spite of this, teachers and dietitians are devoting themselves beyond the call of duty to keep the programme moving smoothly.

An outstanding example is Yokohama's Otsuna Primary School, which has won a citation from the Education Minister for its work in this field. Here, upper and lower class students lunch together in one big tatami room, the purpose being to re-establish vertical contact between older and younger children which has been fading in recent years. One result of this, according to the principal, is that older pupils look after younger children at this school. And because of the friendly atmosphere, the children's appetites have improved.

School lunches account for only one out of six meals that the children eat, but they have become an established part of the children's curriculum, and fill an important role in their education (YOKE)