

Op-Ed Contributor

Time to Revive Home Ec

By HELEN ZOE VEIT, Published: September 5, 2011

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NOBODY likes home economics. For most people, the phrase evokes bland food, bad sewing and self-righteous fussiness.

But home economics is more than a 1950s teacher in cat's-eye glasses showing her female students how to make a white sauce. Reviving the program, and its original premises — that producing good, nutritious food is profoundly important, that it takes study and practice, and that it can and should be taught through the public school system — could help us in the fight against obesity and chronic disease today.

The home economics movement was founded on the belief that housework and food preparation were important subjects that should be studied scientifically. The first classes occurred in the agricultural and technical colleges that were built from the proceeds of federal land grants in the 1860s. By the early 20th century, and increasingly after the passage of federal legislation like the 1917 Smith-Hughes Act, which provided support for the training of teachers in home economics, there were classes in elementary, middle and high schools across the country. When universities excluded women from most departments, home economics was a back door into higher education. Once there, women worked hard to make the case that “domestic science” was in fact a scientific discipline, linked to chemistry, biology and bacteriology.

Indeed, in the early 20th century, home economics was a serious subject. When few understood germ theory and almost no one had heard of vitamins, home economics classes offered vital

information about washing hands regularly, eating fruits and vegetables and not feeding coffee to babies, among other lessons.

Eventually, however, the discipline's basic tenets about health and hygiene became so thoroughly popularized that they came to seem like common sense. As a result, their early proponents came to look like old maids stating the obvious instead of the innovators and scientists that many of them really were. Increasingly, home economists' eagerness to dispense advice on everything from eating to sleeping to posture galled.

Today we remember only the stereotypes about home economics, while forgetting the movement's crucial lessons on healthy eating and cooking.

Too many Americans simply don't know how to cook. Our diets, consisting of highly processed foods made cheaply outside the home thanks to subsidized corn and soy, have contributed to an enormous health crisis. More than half of all adults and more than a third of all children are overweight or obese. Chronic diseases associated with weight gain, like heart disease and diabetes, are hobbling more and more Americans.

In the last decade, many cities and states have tried — and generally failed — to tax junk food or to ban the use of food stamps to buy soda. Clearly, many people are leery of any governmental steps to promote healthy eating; Michelle Obama's campaign against childhood obesity has inspired right-wing panic about a secret food police.

But what if the government put the tools of obesity prevention in the hands of children themselves, by teaching them how to cook?

My first brush with home economics, as a seventh grader in a North Carolina public school two decades ago, was grim. The most sophisticated cooking we did was opening a can of pre-made biscuit dough, sticking our thumbs in the center of each raw biscuit to make a hole, and then handing them over to the teacher, who dipped them in hot grease to make doughnuts.

Cooking classes for public school students need not be so utterly stripped of content, or so cynical about students' abilities to cook and enjoy high-quality food.

A year later, my father's job took our family to Wales, where I attended, for a few months, a large school in a mid-size industrial city. There, students brought ingredients from home and learned to follow recipes, some simple and some not-so-simple, eventually making vegetable soups and meat and potato pies from scratch. It was the first time I had ever really cooked anything. I remember that it was fun, and with an instructor standing by, it wasn't hard. Those were deeply empowering lessons, ones that stuck with me when I first started cooking for myself in earnest after college.

In the midst of contracting school budgets and test-oriented curricula, the idea of reviving home economics as part of a broad offensive against obesity might sound outlandish. But teaching cooking — real cooking — in public schools could help address a host of problems facing Americans today. The history of home economics shows it's possible.

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