

Not So Super Markets

It is counter-productive to tinker with choice add-ons in the context of heavy state regulation.

By James Tooley

(When Dr. Tooley began his research on market reforms in education, he was opposed to them.)

Suppose that in the late 19th century it had been decided that children needed an adequate diet to grow up into good citizens and employees, and it was observed that not all children were getting this. Hence the state, invoking the 'protection of minors' principle, intervenes to ensure an adequate diet for all children.

Through a bold series of ever-more encompassing reforms, starting with the setting up of a National Bread Board through to the creation of the Department for Nutrition, the system is in place by, say, 1970 whereby the vast majority of children attend Local Nutrition Authority (LNA) kitchens for all their eating requirements.

Children are directed to their local kitchen by their LNA; neither they nor their parents have any choice in this matter. Food is provided free at the kitchen, and officials strongly warn against provision of food outside of the kitchen. (In any case, as parents would have to pay for such additional food, there is very little motivation for them to do so.)

Attendance at the kitchens is compulsory for all children, and they have to eat three meals a day, at set times. All children have the same amount of food and the same amount of time in which to eat it. If they haven't finished one course when the time is up, they have to move on to the next.

They eat their meals in their own part of the kitchen around tables with 30 other children of the same age, supervised by one member of the Feeding Profession. If they do not eat their meals at the set times, they are punished, often by being served the meal that they least like when everyone else has gone home.

The Nutrition System as outlined comes under mounting pressures. In many kitchens, it is alleged, food is of poor quality, leading to illness and listlessness. Some of the Feeding Profession cannot control their charges, with consequent riotous mealtimes.

Moreover, it is pointed out that because diet is not centrally prescribed, some kitchens are experimenting with different kinds of food, with disastrous consequences. Samosas served at one school instead of steak and kidney pie creates a huge national scandal. Questions are asked in the House of Commons.

All this seems grossly unfair, particularly as at other institutions mealtimes are orderly and the food good, at least in part. Finally, the children of the rich, it is noted, can afford to opt out of the state system and have food in restaurants, or even in rare cases cooked at home by their parents.

This adds to the inequity of the system, because it is agreed that the quality of private restaurants is better than the state kitchens, and because home cooking clearly deprives children of their national nutritional entitlement. It is apparent that urgent reforms are needed.

The party that wins the next election favours 'markets' as a panacea for the country's ills. It introduces market reforms into the public services, including nutrition.

To avoid alienating the Department for Nutrition and the Feeding Profession, the government sets up a National Dietary Division (NDD) and brings out a National Diet (ND), prescribing the quantity, quality, speed of eating, table levels, and so on, to take place in all kitchens in the country.

To ensure national accountability — so important in a democracy — a testing régime is enhanced, with

frequent eating examinations and publication of kitchen (league) tables. But these are not the key market reforms.

On the demand side, parents are now permitted to choose their preferred kitchen from the two or three in their area. Moreover, whereas previously kitchens had received funding regardless of how many children they had to feed, now they are to be allocated a specific amount for each child. That should keep these kitchens on their toes!

On the supply side, kitchens are now given control of much of their budgets and a rather small number of brand-new expensive kitchens opened, with superb modern cooking equipment. With these demand and supply-side revolutions in place, the government presents its Nutrition Market.

However, it is not long before critics begin condemning the market. Says one professor: look how markets exacerbate inequality! For it is clear that, under the reforms, some kitchens are far more popular than others. Lo and behold, just as one could have predicted, the popular kitchens are able to choose between parents.

Under the guise of consumer choice, it is the producers who are empowered, not the customers, and particularly not the disadvantaged, who end up in the worst kitchens from which the middle classes have escaped.

The debate rages, and when a new government comes into power, under agitation from the Nutrition pressure groups, the market reforms are curtailed. Politicians of all stripes take note and resolve never to take such a risk again.

(Adapted with permission from Reclaiming Education. See our review on page 3.)