

# “Meatless Mondays” and the Rise of Social-Emotional Learning in Schools

One of our favorite family poems is Shel Silverstein’s “Point Of View.” It’s witty without being preachy yet prompts the listener to more thoughtfully consider the act of meat-eating: “Thanksgiving dinner’s sad and thankless/ Christmas dinner’s dark and blue. /When you stop and try to see it/ From the turkey’s point of view.”

Reading this poem reinforces the idea that eating meat or not eating meat is a personal choice, a lifestyle decision that may be rooted in one’s own sense of right and wrong. There are many social, cultural, and individual reasons why someone might be a carnivore or a vegetarian. It’s a private decision of the home and family.

## **Private Choice or Public Policy?**

Except when it isn’t. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced earlier this month that all New York City public schools would enact “Meatless Mondays,” avoiding any meat offerings during Monday school breakfasts and lunches beginning this fall. “Cutting back on meat a little will improve New Yorkers’ health and reduce greenhouse gas emissions,” de Blasio said in a statement. “We’re expanding Meatless Mondays to all public schools to keep our lunch and planet green for generations to come.”

The mayor acknowledges that vegetarianism is a personal choice. At a press conference announcing his new vegetarian agenda, he **stated**: “So, for me, this is very personal, because – and I will say up front, I eat meat and I eat vegetarian dishes and I try and strike a balance between the two. But I have two vegetarians in my home and they feel very strongly about this.”

Mayor de Blasio’s family members apparently feel very strongly about their personal choice to be vegetarians. Good for them. The issue is when someone’s personal preferences become public policy. The mayor explains in his **speech** that sometimes we need those philosopher-kings to guide the masses: “Sometimes it’s our elected officials who are the trailblazers and the visionaries.”

How about letting individuals and families make their own choices about what to eat? Should government officials really have the power to decide what you put into your own body?

There are, thankfully, ways around the Meatless Monday mandate. New York City parents can pack their own child’s meals, **with meat** if they choose. As I’ve written **previously**, these homemade lunches are a much healthier option for children than the USDA-issued variety.

Parents can also opt-out of public schooling altogether, something more parents are doing in New York City and elsewhere to regain control over their children's education.

### **Government Mandating Subjective Decisions**

The Meatless Monday plan is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to government dictates on right and wrong, often using compulsory government schools to influence young people. Comprehensive sex education curriculum mandates in public schools continue to spark controversy, challenging various belief systems and family preferences. And the push to introduce “character education” into schools as a way to boost students' moral compasses begs the question of whose moral compass will be used.

In a pluralistic society, state mandates on morality are inevitably contentious. A new report by Boston's Pioneer Institute examines the growing impact of SEL, or the widespread emphasis on “social-emotional learning” in schools over academic content. Through various curricula and teaching methods, SEL initiatives can mold students' perceptions of themselves and their world in a potentially narrow way.

Jane Robbins co-authored the study, called “Social Emotional Learning: K-12 Education as New-Age Nanny State.” She explains,

*It's one thing to direct your own moral, ethical, and emotional development or that of your children, but having a government vendor or unqualified public school officials implement an SEL curriculum based on coffee-table psychology is quite another.*

Individuals and families should be the ones to determine their own values and moral worldviews, not government agents—often working through public schools—dictating good and bad.