

Pizza Problems

Some experts¹ question rewarding reading with pizza.

Should kids be reading for pizza? A nationwide reading program is drawing criticism² for putting pizza front and center. Since 1985, the restaurant chain Pizza Hut has been running the Book It program, which rewards students for reading with personal pan pizzas. Now some people are taking a slice at Book It. They say the program promotes poor eating habits and gives Pizza Hut free advertising in public schools.

"It's clear that Pizza Hut's Book It has no place in public schools....It promotes junk food," says Susan Linn, a cofounder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. The group has called for schools to stop participating in the Book It program.

Nearly 22 million children in 50,000

U.S. schools take part in Book It. Since the program began, more than 200 million pizzas have been given away. Each year, from October 1 through March 31, students read

books to meet monthly reading goals set by teachers. When students meet their goal for the month, they get a certificate for a personal pan pizza.

"We're really proud of the program," says Leslie Tubbs, the director of Book It. "We get hundreds of e-

mails from [past participants] who praise it and say it helped them get started with reading." In 1988, President Ronald Reagan honored the program for promoting literacy, or reading skills.

But critics say schools can teach students to enjoy reading without the help of a fast-food company. "Schools need to realize that they are undermining their students' well-being," says nutrition expert Jane Levine. She explains that the Book It program is a problem not just because it rewards kids with fast food but also because it makes a large company a regular part of the school day.

¹ experts: people with special skills or knowledge ² criticism: finding fault in something