

Pittsford opts out of 'free lunch'

District declines fed money to offer more food choices

JUSTIN MURPHY

@CITIZENMURPHY

Since 2012, school districts across the country have been under pressure from the federal government to cut back on calories, increase whole-grain offerings and phase out soft drinks. As with many federal regulations, however, the new nutritional guidelines for school lunches are just one-half of the arrangement.

In return for meeting the nutritional standards, districts get a sum of money from the state and federal governments for each meal served. In 2015-16, that sum ranges from 35 cents for a paid meal to \$3.21 for a free meal, served to a student whose family does not meet a certain income threshold.

The regulations, then, aren't absolute law; they're just a condition for a district to receive the government funding.

Most school districts rely heavily on that federal funding, so they have no choice but to follow the guidelines. The Pittsford Central School District, however, is one of the few in the state to opt out, taking advantage of an extremely low poverty rate to offer more flexibility to students at meal time.

Only about 4 percent of Pittsford's 5,800 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches; by comparison, the median rate among local suburban districts is 24 percent. As a result, federal funding makes up relatively little of its food service budget.

In 2012-13, for example, Pittsford took in about \$205,000 in state and federal funding. Rush-Henrietta, which has 7,000 fewer students but a free and reduced lunch rate nine times as high, took in \$1.1 million.

At the same time, Pittsford was like other suburban districts in seeing a decline in student lunch participation. The district convened a committee with staff, parents and students, who reported they felt overly restricted by the new rules.

"They were being told to take a fruit or vegetable, and they didn't like being told they have to do anything, so they stopped purchasing lunch altogether," said Paulette Vangellow, the district's food service director.

The school board voted in May 2013 to stop participating in the federal program. That meant forgoing \$205,000 in revenue, but also being freed of the nutritional restrictions.

"With our ratio of paid to free and reduced, and the paid customers going down, the government model wasn't sustainable for us," Assistant Superintendent for Business Darrin Kenney said. Freed from the nutritional regulations, Vangellow said she can offer larger portions, more seasonal produce and juice every day. In the first year, revenues from full meals and a la carte choices went up about \$95,000. That still led to a food service budget deficit of about \$150,000, but that is less than the \$200,000 deficit the district ran in 2012-13, its last year in the federal program. In 2014-15, the deficit shrank to \$30,000, and Kenney said he hopes to break even this year. The differences are made up through the use of an existing fund balance.

Pittsford also is not required to offer free or reduced-price meals to its 200 or so qualifying students, but it has continued to do so, footing the bill on its own.

Even without the federal rules in place, children in Pittsford still get healthy meals. With the exception of a weekly Salvatore's pizza day, its menu resembles those in most local districts.

It is, however, the highest- priced meal in Monroe County, at \$3. Wraps and other a la carte items are extra.

Pittsford is the only Rochester-area district to opt out of the federal funding program entirely, but at least two others — Niskayuna and Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake, both in the Albany area — have done so.

A third Albany-area district, Voorheesville, opted out for one year before backpedaling; the loss of revenue proved too steep.

“We try to give our customers what they want,” Kenney said. “They weren't getting enough food, they didn't like the food, they were hungry and they were throwing a lot out. And because we're not as dependent on state and federal money, we can be responsive to that.”

JMURPHY7@Gannett

.com



A wrap served at Pittsford Mendon High School.

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ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT, PITTSFORD CENTRAL SCHOOLS