

AND WHO'S EATING IT?

Lunch

WHAT'S IN A SCHOOL LUNCH,

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No one could say the Greece Athena High School cafeteria was lacking creative and healthy options this day. Yet a quick survey of the cafeteria showed more brown bags than meal trays. h “I’ve got to be honest, I just find it very gross,” 12th-grader Jake McDermott said of the school offerings. “It’s just mass-produced frozen stuff.” h Some of his classmates listed a few entrées they do like: for instance, the turkey **See LUNCH, Page 16A** Percentage free and reduced-price among all lunches in Monroe County suburban districts

By the numbers

1.2M

the drop in lunches served (16%) in Monroe County’s suburban school districts from 2010-11 to 2014-15

46.4%

of school lunches that were free or reduced-price in 2014-15, up from 37.7 in 2011-12

\$2.59

average lunch cost in 2015-16, up 38 cents from 2010-11



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paninis and the buffalo chicken pizza.

But most said they either brought food from home or skipped lunch altogether.

Tyler Graves stood up for the cafeteria food, but even his review wouldn't play well on Yelp.

"At the end of the day, it's cheap food and it serves its purpose," he said. "It's not terrible."

Feeding hundreds of children and teenagers a day has never been easy; a set of more stringent federal nutrition standards that took effect in 2012 set the bar higher. As a result, schools across the country are serving healthier food but finding fewer takers.

In Monroe County's suburban school districts, lunch purchases have fallen by 16 percent over five years. That adds up to 1.2 million fewer lunches served countywide in 2014-15 than in 2010-11, and the districts are placing the blame squarely on the new federal regulations.

The decline is seen exclusively among students who do not qualify for free or reduced lunch — that is, those most likely to have other options to choose from.

The stepped-up regulations are relatively new, but the tension between properly nourishing children and making them happy is not. Health experts say the increased focus on whole grains and fresh fruit and vegetables is a crucial part of the fight against childhood obesity — and one that is already paying dividends.

"While the new regulations were certainly a departure from what schools were doing in the past, they're definitely influencing what kids are eating," said Dina Faticone, director of the Healthi Kids program at the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency.

The change is moot, though, if school districts cannot persuade their young customers to buy lunch rather than bring it from home. The data from local suburban districts show they have largely struggled to do so.

The Rochester School District is a different case — as in most urban districts, every one of its students receives free breakfast and lunch because the poverty rate is so high.

The Pittsford Central School District is included in the suburban numbers, but is also in a different position. Since 2013, it has turned down federal school lunch money and therefore is not bound by the nutrition regulations. That means, though, that it pays for poor children's lunches from its own budget.

Why is lunch less appealing?

As for the other local districts: food service directors, students and parents gave three main reasons why lunch isn't as appealing as it used to be.

1. The food doesn't taste as good. An important part of the new federal regulations is an emphasis on foods made with whole grains that are low in calories and sodium, high in vitamins and minerals and varied

throughout the week.

Whole-grain foods such as pasta or crackers are a hard sell in grocery stores to adults of free will. Children haven't been given a choice in the matter — and so are increasingly choosing not to eat the food at all.

“They make more nutritious food, but it's way worse, so no one eats it,” said Tyler, of Greece Athena.

Debbie Beauvais is the food service director for Gates Chili, East Irondequoit and East Rochester and also serves as northeast regional director for the American School Nutrition Association. She listed several innocentsounding items the regulations prevent her from serving: a 16-ounce bottle of skim milk; half a cup of fruit juice five days a week; a packet of light cream cheese to put on a bagel.

“I can't go out and kill my own turkey, dress it, roast it and put it on whole-grain bread and meet my goals,” she said.

2. Portion sizes are smaller. Another tactic to meeting the more restrictive regulations is to decrease portion sizes. Slices of pizza, hamburgers, bagels and bags of potato chips have all been downsized, leaving some students — particularly high school upperclassmen or those with afterschool activities — hungry for more.

Brittany DiPasquale, a 12th-grader at Eastridge High School, had lunch one day last week at the Wegmans adjacent to the school. She said students eat there often, in part because they can't get enough to eat in the cafeteria.

“Lunch period sometimes is way too early, and then they just fill one little square of the tray with mac and cheese,” she said. “And it's like: ‘Um, no, that's not enough.’ ” In theory, the added variety of side dishes, including mandatory fruits and vegetables, means a bigger meal. But when children say they're hungry, it's not usually a cup of diced peaches they have in mind. “If a child took every single thing, it's a really nice meal,” Beauvais said. “But the foods children want are at the center of the plate, and they're getting smaller.”

3. Prices are going up.

Another part of the federal school lunch reform was a requirement that districts charge no less for a lunch than the reimbursement they receive from the federal government for a free one. In 2015-16, that is \$3.08.

Most local districts, however, are well below that price, so they are being allowed to make up the difference through price increases over several years.

In 2010-11, the average cost of lunch at a Monroe County high school was \$2.21. This year, it is \$2.59, an increase of 38 cents.

By real world standards, that's a steal. But school nutrition directors say a certain percentage of students will stop buying lunch every time the price goes up by as little as 10 cents.

The steepest increase has been in Churchville-Chili, where the price went up 65 cents, from \$1.85 to \$2.50. Perhaps not coincidentally, the number of full-price lunches sold there has dropped 35 percent in five years.

The cheapest school lunch in the Rochester area is \$2.10, served in Victor, while the most expensive is \$3 in Pittsford, which has opted out of federal funding altogether.

Results varied

While every Rochester- area district has seen a decline over four years, there is a good deal of local variation.

Webster has seen the greatest student defection. In just one year, its number of paid lunches served plummeted 39 percent, from 507,000 in 2013-14 to 309,000 in 2014-15. That led to a decline in revenue of \$822,000. District spokeswoman Krista Grose said the changes could be attributable to the new federal legislation, including a 30- cent price increase. In neighboring Penfield, meanwhile, the decline has been barely perceptible. Paid lunch sales are down just 8 percent, and an uptick in free and reduced lunches has mostly evened out sales.

Penfield Food Services Director Joe Argento said the best thing the district did was to notify parents well in advance of how the changes would affect their children's lunches, and why it was happening. It also instituted the changes two years before the federal mandate. "We were a couple of years ahead of mandatory changes and there was a lot of community involvement, and that helped," he said. "It wasn't like the kids went home and the parents were like, 'Oh my God, what happened?'" The variation among districts could result from a number of factors, but it points to the role of cafeteria creativity in retaining young customers. Beauvais, for instance, said she's had success mimicking fast-food items such as fruit and yogurt parfaits.

Stephen Cook, a pediatrician at Golisano Children's Hospital and an expert in childhood obesity, said schools should better integrate their lunch programs into health education. They can also make environmental changes that help children's nutritional intake just as much as changing ingredients.

That means considering where to place healthy foods in the cafeteria line, making the cafeteria a pleasant space and establishing relationships between children and food servers. "When the front-line staff are talking with the kids and have a relationship, they can say, 'You should try my broccoli today,' and you get some good results from that," he said.

Sales down, spending flat

One would think that with sales down, districts could at least save by spending less on food. That has not been the case, though, in large part because prices have risen while food providers adjust to the new regulations.

Overall, while lunch sales are down 16 percent over five years, food spending — not counting labor or supplies — is essentially flat. For example, districts who bid through BOCES are paying \$3.65 per pound of ground beef this year compared with \$2.68 in 2012-13. A case of frozen pizzas is \$66, up from \$59.31. "We're hoping that as people get more used to it and the market stabilizes, those prices will get more competitive," said Lou Alaimo, assistant superintendent for administration in the Brighton Central School District.

Besides research and development for new products, suppliers have some increased costs that are not likely to subside. For instance, whole grain flour costs more than white flour. And now that students are required to take fruits and vegetables they may not want to eat, schools are paying for more food that ultimately ends up in the trash.

"We're sourcing out new ingredients to help make the product taste good, and that comes at a cost," said Diana McCarthy, a Buffalo-based school food sales manager for AdvancePierre Foods. "It's the science of having to make these products with less sodium, less fat, and that takes time. ... It's hard to eliminate that stuff and still maintain flavor and texture."

School nutrition programs are supposed to be self-sufficient; that is, the revenue from students and federal

subsidies should meet the cost of running the department. But some districts lately have needed to prop their cafeterias up with fund transfers, in particular when expensive kitchen equipment needs replacing.

“Any big-ticket item is absolutely coming from the general fund,” Alaimo said. “There’s just not enough margin in what we do.”

Reduced-rate lunch rises

Even as students have gone brown-bagging by the thousands, districts have nonetheless seen steady revenue from their school lunch programs. Any gains from higher-priced meals have been mostly offset by lower participation. So how could it be? Even as the number of full-price lunches sold has plummeted, the number of free or reduced-price lunches served has increased every year. It’s not because those students have developed a taste for school food, but rather because there are more of them than ever before. Since 2011-12, the rate of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch has risen in many suburban districts and stayed flat in others. As the paying customer base has fallen, those students — who eat at school four days out of five on average — make up an increasing portion of the diners, as well as the cafeteria proceeds. That shift is also reflected in districts’ revenue streams. For a traditional full-price lunch, the student pays the cost at the register and the federal and state governments contribute an additional 35 cents. For free and reduced-price lunches, though, the government reimbursement is much higher: \$3.13 for a free lunch and \$2.87 for reduced-price (the student pays 25 cents). As a result, federal funding is making up a much larger portion of districts’ food service revenue.

A matter of taste

“The sugar, salt and fat that our kids’ palates are used to lead them to make certain choices,” said Faticone, of Healthi Kids. “Taking those out of the food means there will be an adjustment period, but it’s a way to influence ... students’ eating patterns in a way that impacts them for their whole lives.” Despite the fiscal struggles — something that has varied in districts across the country — nutrition experts are firm in their belief that the new regulations are needed to confront the increasing rate of childhood obesity.

Healthi Kids is active in the Rochester School District, where Faticone said students have been receptive to the healthier food on their plates, particularly after they’ve had some basic nutrition education.

School nutrition lobbyists have clashed for years over the regulations with first lady Michelle Obama, who has championed them since her husband became president in 2009. In the last two months, evidence of a compromise has appeared.

The U.S. Senate is considering bipartisan legislation that would lower the whole grain requirements and delay the implementation of new, lower sodium limits for two years. And even though participation is down overall, some districts report that their youngest children are showing the greatest willingness to eat their vegetables, a sign that today’s strict standards will soon become the new norm. “It’s been a good thing for the kids,” said Argento, from Penfield. “There’s a lot more science and research behind this than there was 30 years ago, so I’ll go with what they tell me. I could sit back and say, ‘Remember when we used to serve cheeseburgers right off the griddle?’ But maybe that wasn’t always such a good idea.”

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A student at Greece Odyssey High School orders the chicken Parmesan, which was nothing more than a processed chicken patty. The bread stick, according to our reporter, was the best part of the \$2.50 meal.

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Some school lunches fall short on appeal and taste because of more stringent federal nutrition standards.

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