

RCS D stops serving students hot lunches

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA
TODAY NETWORK

Students in the Rochester City School District will be eating cereal for breakfast and cold sandwiches for lunch for the foreseeable future, the result of low in-person enrollment and a tight budget.

The immediate reason is that there are not enough trained cook managers to oversee a full kitchen operation in the buildings. Most of those employees faced layoffs or steep hours reductions in the fall, and many are no longer available to return now that schools are open again, said Dan DiClemente, president of the non-educators union BENTE.

Even if they were available, it's not clear RCS D could afford them. Food service is supposed to be a cost-neutral operation, with the federal per-meal reimbursement going to pay for the food and labor.

About 3,100 students attended inperson classes on Monday, the first day of hybrid learning for elementary students, district spokeswoman Marisol Ramos-Lopez said; another 1,000 were enrolled but did not come, either because they missed school or because their parents decided to keep them in remote learning after all.

That attendance is about 12% of the overall district enrollment, meaning the district's revenue from meals is down precipitously.

"There's a requirement to run the lunch fund as close to cost-neutral as possible," Chief of Operations Mike Schmidt said Tuesday. "It's better to move slowly and prudently than to do something to further damage the financial status of the district."

More than half of the children in the city live beneath the poverty line, which is \$26,200 for a family of four. Every student in the district receives breakfast and lunch at no cost.

"Nobody can be successful in school on an empty stomach," Foodlink CEO Julia Tedesco said in a statement. "We've been doing our best to support RCS D since COVID-19 came to our community, and we stand ready to assist in providing quality meals to all the kids who have started to attend in-person school in the last week."

The district was forced to defend its culinary options after a teacher posted a picture on social media of Monday's meal in elementary schools: a package of dried turkey sticks, a cheese stick, crackers, a pear, a juice box and a carton of chocolate milk.

By comparison, students in other Monroe County districts could choose on Tuesday from more traditional cafeteria fare: cheeseburgers on a whole grain bun in Greece, tacos or rice and beans in Pittsford, "pizza crunchers" and baked beans in Webster.

Re-hiring cook managers will be difficult even if enrollment increases. There is a lengthy on-

has been criticized equally for *not* looking at things from a strictly financial perspective.

Ramos-Lopez pointed out that the meals RCS D is serving meet federal guidelines and vary from day to day. It's the same food that has been available at grab-and-go sites throughout the year during remote learning. Schmidt said the district will continue to evaluate its food choices, in particular after secondary students return later this month. If there are enough students in schools, hot lunches could return, he said.

On Tuesday, RCS D students got a bagged sandwich, apple slices, crackers and a juice box.



A Rochester City School District tweeted a photo of the lunch offering for students.
TWITTER

In theory the district could cover the shortfall from its general fund as it did last spring. Broadly speaking, though, RCSD's general fund lately has been in no condition to cover anything.

boarding process that includes training in food safety, and people must have some cooking experience, DiClemente said.

“I think they’re telling operations: ‘Any penny you make from the meals you’re serving had better cover the staff you have,’” he said. “We tried to tell them the danger of looking at things from a strictly financial perspective, and here we are.”

The district, of course,