



March 23, 2009

Rally to protest Rochester schools' food

David Andreatta
Staff writer

In the lunchroom at School 28 in Rochester, a girl pokes a congealed dollop of something green with a plastic fork, a boy on the verge of tears complains the food is inedible, and tinfoil trays filled with uneaten food spill into a trash can.

They are images in *Lunch is Gross!* a documentary produced by students at the northeast city school whose title is the battle cry for a rally Thursday outside the Rochester School District headquarters. The goal: Improving school food.

Organizers claim several hundred people have signed a petition calling for healthier cafeteria fare, and expect the demonstration to draw a couple hundred people, including parents, healthy food advocates and the third-grade students who created the video for a class project.

"What is resonating with people is a sense that there should be high-quality, nutritious, appealing meals served to children in schools and child care settings," said Wade Norwood, a New York state regent and community engagement director for the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency.

The agency is orchestrating the demonstration through its HEALTHi Kids initiative.

School food is a time-tested punch line for unappetizing jokes about mystery meat and gruel.

But it is no laughing matter for the nearly 29,500 Rochester public school students who are eligible for free- and reduced-price meals.

At the same time, the district is contending with the competing forces of tighter budget constraints and a greater focus on childhood nutrition.

The district serves about 11,000 breakfasts and 18,000 lunches daily through its food-service provider, Chartwells, whose 2005 contract has been renewed by the Board of Education annually and is up for renewal again in June.

This year, the district budgeted \$13 million to feed students, about 90 percent of which is reimbursed by the state and federal governments, according to the district.

Rochester School Board President Malik Evans, a product of Rochester public schools, said the current contract has not addressed the concerns about food quality from students and parents.

"We've gotten assurances in the past that we're getting better menus and it just hasn't happened," Evans said. "Too many kids are still complaining about the food."

District spokesman Tom Petronio said the food services contract will be put out to bid this year, with an eye toward increasing the amount the district pays per meal by 10 percent to 15 percent — from the current 91 cents per meal — and beefing up the central kitchen facilities. As it stands, most fruit

offerings come from cans because the kitchen does not have the space or equipment to process fresh fruit, Petronio said.

The district is also seeking input on menu offerings from parents and healthy food advocates such as Foodlink and the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency. "We don't want to skimp on the quality of what we're feeding our students," Petronio said.

Chartwells spokeswoman Caroline Nelson said the health and safety of students and staff is the top priority and that the company was "unaware of any protests or petitions circulating, and are meeting all requirements within our current contract."

"Any concerns with the food service program, such as a low fixed cost per meal or limitations related to the facility structure, are addressed and resolved directly with our client at Rochester schools," Nelson said. "It is Chartwells' ultimate goal to partner with our districts to create customized dining solutions that benefit our schools while fostering healthy communities."

The *Lunch is Gross!* video has attracted considerable attention since it was posted on TeacherTube.com a year or so ago, having been viewed nearly 3,600 times, according to the Web site.

The 7-minute newscast-style documentary features students, school staff and parents who do not mince words about the cafeteria food.

An unidentified woman says of the meals, "It sort of smells like canned dog food, but I'm pretty sure my dog wouldn't eat them." A boy standing before a red and blue pie chart reports that 41 percent of students surveyed have found hair in their food.

"I see a lot of food thrown in the garbage," said a woman identified as a "lunch lady." "I think that pretty much says it all."

The rally is scheduled for 5 p.m. Thursday prior to a meeting of the school board.

DANDREAT@DemocratandChronicle.com

Additional Facts

To learn more

"Lunch is Gross!" can be viewed at www.teachertube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=d401f8feb83e8c2d94b2.
