

https://journaltimes.com/news/local/inadequate-school-lunches-were-a-big-problem-at-rusd-in-2021-22-will-they-be/article_e0c4d1ea-e29f-11ec-a928-2755d9c98b38.html

ALERT

SCHOOL LUNCHES

Inadequate school lunches were a big problem at RUSD in 2021-22. Will they be better next year?

Ryan Patterson

Jun 12, 2022



From left: Tatiana, Claudia Morales-Cruz and Kashay Johnson are Julian Thomas Elementary School fifth-graders who have demanded improvements to food service at Racine Unified. About a dozen students wrote a letter listing 10 demands, including that food be freshly cooked by school staff who are paid livable wages. "We are the future, and we deserve to be taken seriously and treated with respect," the letter states.

Submitted

Ryan Patterson

RACINE — It started with an assignment. A writing prompt asked fifth-graders at Julian Thomas Elementary how the school could improve.

Some students wrote about food service challenges. Long after the assignment was done, they kept pursuing the topic.

Kashay Johnson and Claudia Morales-Cruz are two of the students who have worked on the issue for several months and demanded improvements. They have received more than 200 signatures from students and teachers on a petition outlining their concerns.

Morales-Cruz and Johnson both said they have felt sick after consuming school food, and Morales-Cruz said she once vomited after eating a school meal. Food was sometimes cold or burnt, and they said the school served expired milk in March 2021 when students returned to in-person learning.

Julian Thomas students met with their principal and Racine Unified School District officials on April 1 regarding the quality of school meals, and some changes occurred as a result, including an oven repair.

People are also reading...

- 1 Racine woman accused of assaulting and choking a teenage girl**
- 2 How the 7th-grade Park Panthers football team won every game but still missed the playoffs**
- 3 Man, boy die in early morning fire Sunday in Kenosha; neighbor hears explosion**
- 4 Pennsylvania woman was driving 100 mph just before fatal crash with Wisconsin state senator, police say**

Issues remained though, and Johnson called it stressful to know that school food could make her ill.

“It’s driving me crazy,” Johnson said.

A letter sent to The Journal Times from a dozen Julian Thomas students, including Johnson and Morales-Cruz, demanded “that RUSD provide their students with nutritious, healthy and good-tasting food.”

The students listed 10 demands, including that food be freshly cooked by school staff who are paid livable wages.

“We are the future, and we deserve to be taken seriously and treated with respect,” the letter states.

Food service officials said supply chain issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and labor shortages have created challenges to providing quality meals at schools, challenges that exist **across the country**.

Supply chain problems began at “the very beginning of COVID, and quite honestly I don’t see that ending anytime soon,” Cheryl Herman, RUSD food service coordinator, said in an interview.

When food is damaged or does not arrive in time because of supply chain challenges, that results in last-minute meal changes. Herman mentioned a recent issue with bread that did not rise properly. In those instances, RUSD must “make a menu adjustment to the best of our ability with what we have in stock and go with it,” Herman said.

The 2021-22 school year ended last week. Starting this summer, RUSD is planning some changes to its meal offerings, but nothing drastic.



Herman

Nationwide challenge

Last month, school meals were discussed by the Racine Unified School Board multiple times. The contract with the school district’s food service provider, Aramark, was also extended through the 2022-23 school year.

During a May 2 work session, board member Scott Coey said he needed to address ongoing food service challenges.

“We look incompetent as a board and as administration if we didn’t acknowledge that issue,” Coey said.

Mary Dumont, Aramark residential district manager, said on May 2 that food service must be prioritized more in RUSD, including giving students more time to eat.

“School breakfast and school lunch need to be an integral part of the school day, and quite frankly it’s not,” Dumont said.

Coey emphasized the importance of quality school food and said it is “a big issue” locally and elsewhere.

“This is not limited to Racine ... and this is not limited to Aramark,” Coey said.

In March, Milwaukee students launched a campaign demanding better meals. Coey said similar issues exist in Kenosha, where he is a teacher.

Issues

Locally, Julian Thomas Elementary is not the only school with challenges.



Coey



Claudia Morales-Cruz, a fifth-grader at Julian Thomas Elementary School, is one of several students demanding improvements to food service at Racine Unified.

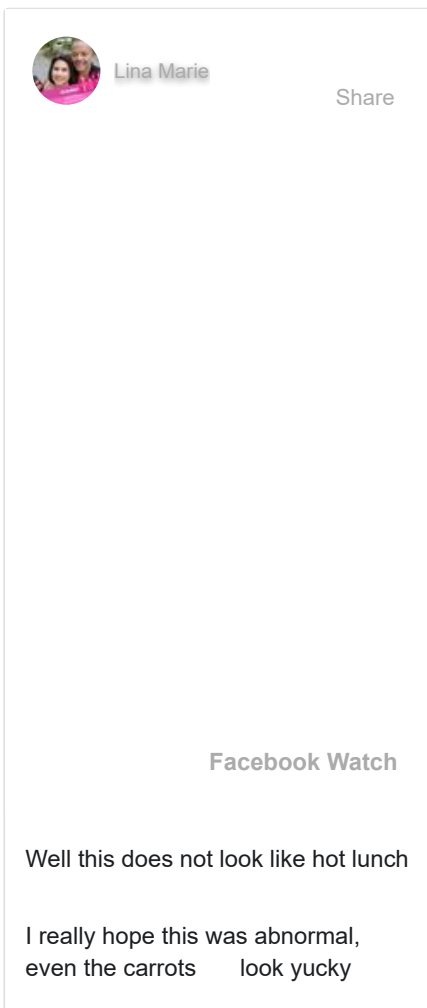
Submitted

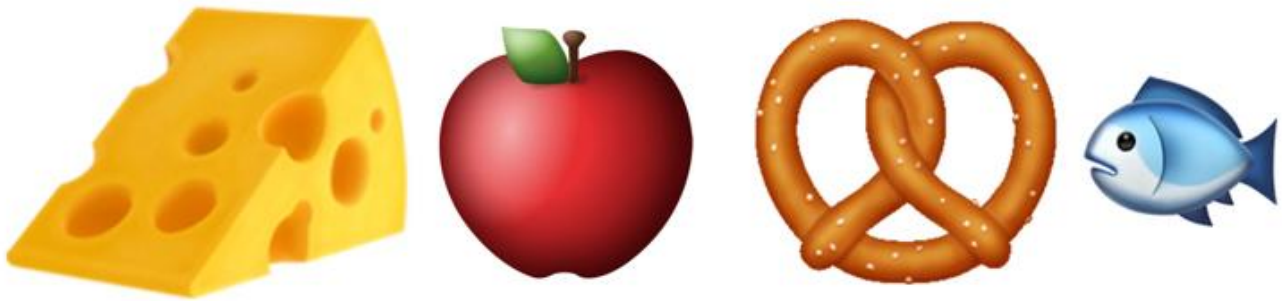
On April 6, a mother with children at Wadewitz Elementary said in a message to The Journal Times: “My kids came home starving and told me they had carrots, apple slices, and three slices of cheese for LUNCH. I thought surely they were served more but just decided not to eat what was offered. I was wrong.”

That same day, a video was posted on social media of a “hot lunch” at Gifford School that included what appeared to be a slice of American cheese, a bag of Goldfish pretzels, raw carrots and a small bag of apple slices.

In an apologetic post on social media, RUSD said that “supply chain issues have been a huge challenge for school lunches here in RUSD and across the country. But we have clearly **missed the mark** with the lunch served this Wednesday. We are working to correct it going forward.”

Herman said that the food served April 6 was “not a good menu choice, and steps were taken so that that will never, ever be served again.” She said she “can still see the gooey cheese in my sleep.”





Racine Unified apologizes for having 'missed the mark' with school lunches this week

Beth Ann Engelland, Wisconsin Aramark district manager, told the RUSD board on May 2 that the company investigates all food complaints.

“Each occurrence that happens, we investigate and take very seriously, especially as it relates to food safety,” Engelland said.

For example, Herman said the milk served to students in March 2021 was investigated, and it was determined that there was “a bad run from the dairy” supplying the milk.

“We had problems with several schools,” Herman told The Journal Times. “It was not just Julian Thomas. Obviously the dairy replaced the milk immediately and, to the best of our knowledge, we have not had any issues since then.”

There was also a heating issue with an oven at Julian Thomas, which Herman said was fixed shortly after school officials met with students in April.

“We did discover that the heating element was bad on the oven,” Herman said. “We should never be serving meals that are overcooked.”

Journal Times editorial: Alert to parents on RUSD lunch issues would have helped

The Journal Times Editorial Board



Food service contract renewed

Herman, Engelland and Dumont spoke during the May 2 work session because the RUSD board was discussing renewing the school district's food service contract with Aramark.

During its May 16 business meeting, the RUSD Board renewed a contract with Aramark for the 2022-23 school year. The school district began contracting with the company in 2018.

The **2022-23 contract** includes a 7.7% price increase per meal “to reflect rising labor and food costs,” according to a board fact sheet. “Through participation in the Community Eligibility Provision Program, breakfast and lunch will continue to be offered at no charge for all students for the 2022-23 school year.”

Engelland said on May 2 that the price increase should help Aramark hire more food service workers, which could lessen the challenges caused by labor shortages.

“We have a lot of vacancies on our team, and we need them filled,” Engelland said.

Herman said that RUSD has 48 food service vacancies out of 130 positions, meaning 37% of its jobs are open. She added that the Administrative Service Campus kitchen has seven of its 15 positions vacant, including a cook job.

“That is a critical shortage,” Herman said. “If we don't have people to serve our students, we're in a tough place.”

Because of staffing challenges, Herman said there is less meal variety, so items like chicken patties are served more often.

“We're repeating the same things more frequently than we would like,” Herman said.

Ongoing concerns

During the May 16 RUSD board meeting, **Coey**, a teacher at Kenosha Bradford High School, noted that quality meals are crucial to creating a good learning environment.

“If the kids are eating poor food and/or they're not eating it, we can't teach. Therefore, we can't get results,” Coey said. “Teaching students who refuse to eat the food because it's moldy, chunky, to be blunt, nasty at times — I can't teach them if they don't eat.”

RUSD Board President Jane Barbian agreed.

“Our students need to learn when they come to school, and to be ready to learn they need to have good nutrition and good health,” Barbian told a reporter. “If a child is hungry or is having poor nutrition, that’s a concern. They won’t be able to learn.”

According to the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**, “eating breakfast at school is associated with better attendance rates, fewer missed school days and better test scores.” And the **Food Research & Action Center** reports that students “receiving free or reduced-price school lunches reduces poor health by at least 29 percent based on estimates using national data.”



Barbian

The letter from Julian Thomas Elementary students stated that they and their peers have felt the impacts of poor food.

“Our classmates have been going to the nurse and the restroom a lot, because the meals that we have for lunch are incredibly disgusting,” the letter states. “The food is so bad we can’t eat it and we go hungry.”

Herman said that she contacted a school district paraprofessional and the Julian Thomas school nurse, neither of whom “could support that claim” in the student letter.

“We now have everybody watching for that, but we have not seen any instances of students going to the school nurse with food-related illnesses,” Herman said.

On May 2, Herman told the RUSD board that she takes that issue “very seriously.”

“The last thing we want to do is make one of our children sick, and we know our kids count on our food,” Herman said. “We know that there are some children that this is the only opportunity that they have to eat.”

Potential improvements

In addition to meeting with school district officials, RUSD Superintendent Eric Gallien emailed Julian Thomas student Gonzales-Cruz on April 28 about food service.

“Thank you and your classmates for reaching out regarding your concerns about school lunch,” Gallien wrote in the email reviewed by The Journal Times. “We have worked to address the issues you and your fellow students raised and will continue to listen to your ideas for how we may improve our lunches to the best of our ability.”

Herman said RUSD will have ongoing conversations to receive student feedback on food service. That includes the school district conducting regular surveys of high-schoolers about meals starting this fall.

“(Students) need to have a voice,” Herman said.

Herman said there will be similar steps taken at middle schools and elementary schools, including working with the RUSD dietitian on random student surveys during lunch.

A **pilot program** providing more food choices could also help. Beginning at elementary schools during summer classes, which start June 20, Herman said the district is offering two hot lunch entrée options instead of one.

“I think whenever you give students a choice, they’re going to be able to choose something that hopefully they enjoy,” Herman said.

If that program works, RUSD will expand it at the start of the 2022-23 school year.

For Johnson and Morales-Cruz, this fall they will attend new middle schools. However, they plan to continue the work they started last year with a class assignment and keep advocating for better food at Julian Thomas Elementary.

“If it does get better,” Morales-Cruz said, “then we’re going to be happy for the students that come here.”



Gallien