

INSOURCING: Siuslaw schools take back their cafeteria

Real food, made by union workers, will replace outsourced chicken nuggets

By Jason Cox
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Outsourced food service is coming to an end in the Siuslaw School District this fall.

The three-school, 1,300-student district — based in Florence, Oregon — privatized its cafeterias two decades ago. Its most recent contract was with Chartwells School Dining Services, which manages cafeterias at over 550 school districts nationwide.

Now, administrators decided, they'll run their own food service department, staffed by 11 new members of Oregon School Employees Association.

David Bitner, a former University of Oregon dining services manager, will lead the transition, using his expertise and vendor contacts to help deliver a superior experience for students.

"No one will remember the days of chicken nuggets when I'm done here," Bitner said. "The vision for the future was to go back to home-style cooking. These contract management companies — 95 percent of everything they serve students is heat and serve. It comes in frozen and they put it in an oven."

"I think our district is very fortunate," said Wendy Rohner, who was president of OSEA's Siuslaw Chapter 57 until she retired in June. "Our students are really going to come out on top."

Before administrators made the decision, the district established a food service committee with staff, students and community members. They analyzed food options, the budget and what was feasible. Owning their kitchen equipment was a key factor in the decision to insource.

Under outsourcing, food quality was a common complaint in the district, resulting in low participation among students who did not receive free or reduced lunches.



Siuslaw School District Food Services Director David Bitner and OSEA Chapter 57 president Wendy Rohner tour the cafeteria at Siuslaw Elementary School in Florence, Oregon.

"They vote with their feet, and those who can end up bringing their own food to schools," said Siuslaw School District superintendent Ethel Angal.

The ability to hire, train and discipline their own employees — as well as provide a benefits package (which the contractor did not) — was another motivator.

"They weren't technically ours," Angal said. "It wasn't something bad about them. It's just one step removed. When employees are ours, I think it (also) makes a difference in morale."

Recently implemented national regulations on school foods have presented challenges to districts nationwide.

Given that Siuslaw can only spend about 90 cents per student meal, removing the profit motive will allow the district to focus that limited amount fully on students. They will be able to serve larger portions in some circumstances to ensure older kids are adequately fed, particularly at dinner.

Bitner provided chicken as an example. A USDA entitlement program provides unprocessed chicken at \$1 a pound. The contractor would receive it, process it into nuggets, patties and fingers, and then send it frozen to

schools.

"If you take it and process it yourself at the local level, I have an almost-unlimited amount of chicken to serve in the dinner program," Bitner said. "I'll roast it, I'll try it in whole-wheat flour, I can pull it."

Bitner said the new flexibility allows him to find creative ways

to keep kids interested while also providing nutritious meals.

Cutting back on sodium means no pepperoni on pizza and finding spices like cumin to supplement reduced-salt Mexican food. The cafeterias will also have a salad bar, allowing kids to customize their meal.

Bitner secured a contract with

Childers Meat Company, which will provide beef that is grass fed and free of antibiotics or hormones. Joining a co-op will allow food deliveries several times per week, ensuring fresh food is always available.

"We're not tied to a profit and loss statement," Bitner said. "If we want to change the meals tomorrow because we have the chance to get a truckload of produce from a farm down the street, we can do that."

Blake hopes that having higher-quality food for students will translate into an improved overall experience.

"We have kids eating breakfast, lunch and dinner here," Blake said. "To get better quality food in their bellies will be hugely impactful in a number of ways."

Rohner believes variety will teach kids to like foods they may not have tried otherwise. Her experience coordinating Fitness Fridays, which is accompanied by a healthy vegetable or fruit snack, is cause for hope.

"They gobble it," Rohner said. "If you can convince them to take the first bite, they'll be back. I think it will be the same way here."



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