

Has the school cafeteria lunch finally come of age?

By *Leslie Mladinich*
The Montclarion

Dressed in uniforms embossed with colorful fruit figurines, they arrive at work while darkness still lingers. Hours later, they dole out ice-cream scoop mounds of fried rice at a record pace to winding lines of students.

They are the district's 400 food service workers who prepare, cook, deliver, regulate and serve 30,000 meals a day — their efficiency, work ethic and care for the students a shining example of the many things the district is trying to do, the Board of Education unanimously agrees.

Some workers even serve as quasi social workers — discreetly serving some of the 25,000 students eligible for free or reduced lunches via Aid to Families with Dependent Children or food stamps without any additional fuss.

The division, solvent at last after paying back nearly \$1.8 million to OUSD's general purpose fund, is a district success story.

Food services — which now employs some workers with 30 years of tenure and perfect attendance — has paid back every dime after taking a loan out while simultaneously changing the stereotypical cafeteria fare of "Chefs Surprise" to Southwestern Fajitas and other popular items.

Food tastes change with the times, agreed Maggie Saunders, manager of the Skyline High School cafeteria for 25 out of 34 years of service to the school. The cafeteria goes through 25 cases of bottled spring water a week, the salad bar line is as long as the one for french fries and "Luiji's Ice," a no-fat frozen concoction in lemonade and berry flavors is especially popular with weight-conscious high school

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Maggie Saunders takes a lunchtime order from a hungry Skyline student.

Jeff Lindquist — STAFF

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food service customers, unanimously agree that the food has gotten better. "By the end of the week," said senior Camille Harvey, "you can be so broke."

The universal language

At hill or flatland locations, food is the universal language to most students. Features on a September menu include "Dino Nuggets with Barbeque Sauce" and "Chili Cheese Nachos" at the elementary level to paper-containers of french-fries slathered in cheese and beans and chow mein at the high school level.

Pride in their work radiates at the high school, where Saunders, adamantly states that "the students are our customers — your kitchen is a reflection of you."

The same mantra is voiced at the Prescott kitchen, the division's epicenter. In the main building across the yard, cold food is unpacked, prepped and shipped out on scheduled delivery trucks. Most hills area schools get food delivered hot from the Oakland High School kitchen. Field Supervisor Busayo Alabi said the district's goal is for the Prescott kitchen to take over the responsibility.

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— ANITA HOLQUIST, FOOD SERVICES DIRECTOR

In addition to the challenge of preparing healthy balanced meals that students will actually eat, some of the additional pressures food services endure include retaining central administration as the boss and the federal government wishing to cut them out of some

32 million meals served daily across the country.

More recent pressures, say Alabi food services director Anita Holquist, include Congress — as recently as two years ago — advocating block grants instead of direct funding for the free and reduced meal program that would have resulted in a 17 percent for the division. Pressures from central administration to contract services out when the operation was mired in financial troubles and a revolt by some principals over the serving of breakfast are other subjects of concern.

Oakland's \$14 million operation is part of the country's school lunch program created 50 years ago under President Harry Truman's administration and reflects some of the national tumult. Lawmakers, stymied by the large number of military recruits who failed physicals due to nutrition-related problems, signed the program into law.

In 1969, the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health led to the expansion of child nutrition programs and created the free and reduced-price school lunch program for low-income students. Government approved the school breakfast program in 1975 but federal support was gutted in later years under President Ronald Reagan's administration.

In the early 1990s the district's 53 school kitchens were downsized to 33, although every member of the workforce held onto jobs through the reorganization. Management has learned to adjust its operations despite the bureaucratic red tape they sometimes operate under.

Purchasing food items with cash rather than through the more common commodity system has allowed the district more choice in selecting healthier ingredients. For example, instead of receiving a certain amount of ground beef, food services will instead receive the value in cash. High school lunches cost \$1.50 full price and \$1.25 full price in grammar school.

Even with the low-cost, food services continues to flourish — turning a profit every year except the last during the strike. In the 1992-93 fiscal year the Prescott Central Kitchen, which ships out breakfasts and a choice of three entrees a day to 33 schools and child-care centers combined, made \$500,000. The renovation plus the consolidation of 20 kitchens in all that's left of the original 52, has garnered a savings of \$400,000 in salaries and benefits.

Despite the successes there is more work to be done, Holquist said. Food services has hired a consultant to help run the marketing arm of the operation and needs to hire a registered dietitian to coordinate menus — a job Holquist has been tending to along with her other responsibilities. In addition, plans are underway to revamp secondary-school menus.

Gauging kids' food preferences is the easy part, Holquist and other workers agree. French fries, pizza and burritos are the mainstay of American kids' school lunch of preference.

"Fast food is what kids go for. You try to emulate fast food and make it nutritious," Holquist said, noting that food services has managed to add a healthy twist to fast food by providing whole-wheat hamburger buns and sweet potatoes as part of the regular fare.