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Cafeteria food? Yum!

New Easthampton schools program lauded

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EASTHAMPTON - This is one of those man-bites-dog stories.

In Easthampton this year, it seems that students actually like the cafeteria food.

Cook Mary Ann Mimitz said in the 14 years she has worked for Easthampton school food services, she's never had as many ingredients to cook with since Chartwells became the new provider this school year.

On Wednesday, Mimitz, chefs manager in the high school cafeteria, made lo mein with her colleagues. She pointed to a variety of spices on a high shelf.

"We have all these spices we've never had before," Mimitz said. "I'm learning to cook a lot more things. It was crazy at first, but now it's fun."

New this year, the bulk of school food offerings are prepared from scratch, including Asian and Mexican dishes, chicken and sauces, and even pizza with fresh, roasted vegetables. Principal Vito Perrone said he was delighted by his first taste of Chartwells dining services, a pineapple chicken meal.

"We're trying to go a lot heavier on scratch cooking," said Andrew Stratton, Chartwells director for Easthampton and Granby schools, a combined student population of 3,000. Stratton added convenience items like chicken patties are a popular student choice that won't go anywhere, but scratch food is a healthier alternative to pre-packaged foods.

1 2



KATHLEEN DUNCAN

Cassondra Fleury grabs a salad and milk for lunch in the Easthampton High school cafeteria while cafeteria worker Julie St. Laurence rings up the price of the lunch.



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If student participation is any indication of the program's success, Easthampton food services seems to be doing well. Participation is up, Stratton said, noting a report with numbers will be presented to the School Committee this fall.

Students say they've noticed better quality, a wider selection and choice variety.

"Everything has improved," said Corrin Halford, 17. "I like it a lot better. Everything's fresh and they make the food right in front of you."

Junior Lauren Peck, 16, said the new chicken wrap is her favorite lunch. She said school lunch is noticeably healthier than last year.

"Last year the salads looked like they sat around," Peck said. "Everything's just fresh and cleaner" this year

There are some gripes still. Some students say they are unhappy with Chartwells smaller portions and its short supply of their fried favorites, like french fries.

Senior Alex Morris, 18, said he prefers two cheeseburgers to one cheeseburger with vegetables, and it frustrates him he can't get a second cheeseburger without paying \$2.50 for an additional lunch.

Chartwells, an international company based in North Carolina under Compass Group, came on board in Easthampton when school officials decided to make the program self-sustaining.

In other words, there is no line item for food services on the city budget - a big change, considering food services have consistently run in the red over the last few years. Last year, the city budgeted \$38,000 for school food service in fiscal 2009, and a \$44,000 deficit followed this summer.

With Chartwells, school lunch revenues cover labor costs, food costs and equipment. The company, however, charges a \$5,000 management fee and \$52,028 administrative fee.

School business manager Andrew Paquette said a digital, touch screen point-of-sale system in which students swipe cards and manage their account balances online will make the program more accurate and accountable. He added students, parents and lunchtime sales clerks will be able to access student profiles, which include allergy information and history of transactions. The new system is expected to be implemented this fall.

Hired this summer, Stratton, a former employee in Easthampton school food services, said employees have been busy to make the change a successful one.

"As a self-operating program it was a lot harder to have a very diverse menu," Stratton said.

"Trainings, the marketing of the program, support from Chartwells and the regional dietician... there are a lot more things to do.'

"The key thing that made it work is the staff. All the food quality and presentation comes from our staff, which has done an excellent job in the transition to Chartwells."

All of the food service employees who worked last school year were asked if they wanted to work for Chartwells, Stratton said. Only two left, but several contemplated leaving in the beginning, Mimitz said. People were frustrated by the lack of response from the company in terms of wages, benefits and hours. About 15 food service employees complained to the School Committee in June regarding their unanswered questions. "I believe through the whole contract there were times when both sides felt the School Department and Chartwells did not have information," Stratton said. Both sides "hadn't decided on exact wages and schedules."

There are 24 employees now, five of which are fulltime. All part-time employees took a \$2 per hour pay cut and went from 20 hour weeks to 30 hour weeks.

A fulltime employee, Mimitz said she lost all of her sick and personal days in the switch, a total of 600 hours. She said she also was displeased with the health insurance plan.

"I wasn't going to come back," she said.

Mimitz, who was given a \$1.50 per hour raise this year, had four followers who she said decided to

stay when she did.

"I have a great crew," Mimitz said, looking at her colleagues in the kitchen as "Benny and the Jets" played in the background. "We get along. If you come in here early in the morning, it's like the Oprah show."

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