

Schools

Local schools feel the heat in the kitchen

Food price increases bump up school lunches

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It's no secret food prices are rising.

Pocketbooks everywhere are feeling the sting in the grocery store checkout lane as higher dairy, produce, bread and meat prices rack up that number at the bottom of the receipt.

The issue is not only affecting consumers.

School boards across the area and across the country are approving higher ticket prices for school lunches as food services deal with increased food costs, and

record fuel prices associated with transporting the food. In addition, federal reimbursement is not keeping with rising food costs. That's not all; districts must take into account nutrition and keep students' palates in mind - if kids don't like it, they're not going to eat it.

The balance is not easy. As food costs continue to increase, so do the number of children struggling with obesity and diabetes.

"I will not sacrifice children's nutrition," said Cathy Graham, director of food service for the Pewaukee School District. Instead, Graham said she will cut costs in other places. She will look for more fruits and vegetables in season, tighten up labor costs and

do simple things like turn off lights and run the dishwasher during off periods when possible, she said.

At a Hamilton School Board meeting in April, Hamilton's Manager of Food Services Judy Pinter and Director of Business Services Bryan Ruud presented a memorandum to the board that spelled out the challenges the district's kitchens would face in the 2008-09 school year, and asked the board for an increase in school lunch prices.

"Already this year we have been experiencing significant increases in costs for our pre-packaged food products and base materials such as flour. We have been warned that this trend will continue over the next

year," the memo stated. It went on to say, "While we pride ourselves in providing both a cost-effective and quality lunch program, we cannot do so without a cost increase next year due to the inflationary environment food products are in."

Graham said Pewaukee's school lunch went up a dime for the coming school year, which still will probably not cover the increased costs.

To keep up with rising costs, St. Joan of Arc Catholic School bumped their lunch price up 20 cents from last year to \$2.55, said Principal Mary Ann Rudella.

The Hamilton School District received a letter from Fox River Foods Inc. at the end of January that detailed

the extreme nature of rising food costs. Pam Fleming, Fox River Foods director of education sales, wrote, "Due to severe and unprecedented market fluctuations, we are finding it impossible to hold pricing on certain items within your bid." Fleming went on to write that the price of food, across the board, increases at a daily rate.

The Hamilton School Board approved the recommended 10-cent increase for elementary meals and the 25-cent increase at the middle and high school, which brings school lunches to \$2.10 at the elementary level and \$2.50 at the middle and high schools.

Pewaukee lunches are

School lunch prices rising

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now \$1.75 in the elementary school and a flat \$2 for fourth through 12 grades.

Federal help

Federal reimbursement rates aren't keeping up with the rising cost of food.

According to the School Nutrition Association, the average full cost to prepare a healthy school lunch is about \$2.88, compared to the federal reimbursement provided to cover that cost, which is set at \$2.57.

To keep things in check, Graham said she wants to minimize waste so she'll keep a close eye on portion sizes, and refill lunch-line items more often rather than over-filling to begin with.

Though costs will be cut, Graham will not cut food options.

Next year, she'll offer high-protein grains such as couscous and quinoa, she said.

Lunch choices

So what does about \$2 get you these days?

At Pewaukee, kindergarten through sixth grades have their choice of one hot entree; a "grab-n-go" salad, or a deli sandwich and with that comes a fruit, vegetable and milk. Once a week, students can satisfy their sweet tooth when they are offered a made-by-scratch

dessert item, which is down from last year when dessert was offered two days a week, Graham said.

Although school lunch prices are rising, students

are still getting a bargain.

Last year, The School Nutrition Association estimated the average cost of a bringing a lunch from home was about \$3.43.