

# ‘September has been rough.’ School districts are scrambling to find food for student meals

Supply chain and staffing shortages combined with vast expansion of free lunch programs are overwhelming cafeterias this fall

By [Janelle Nanos](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 30, 2021, 6:52 a.m.



Seventh-graders (from left) Hasnain Ali, Giordano Cinci, Samuel Hernandez, Ruslan Lavrishin, and Ryan Mahmoud ate outside Thursday at Watertown Middle School. The district is serving lunch to far more students now than it was before the pandemic. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

There are a few things that every elementary school student knows: You have to be kind to others. You have to listen to your teachers. And on Fridays, you always eat pizza.

Or at least that's how things used to be, back in Before Times. But now, the future of Pizza Friday is in doubt — the latest bit of normalcy upended by the pandemic. The closure of major wholesalers like

Russo's market, coupled with ongoing labor shortages and supply chain woes, have school nutrition directors throughout Massachusetts scrambling to source key products, throwing their carefully calibrated lunch menus into chaos.

“Our kids love their Pizza Fridays, but the dough? It’s hard to come by,” said Liz Polay-Wettengel, spokesperson for Salem Public Schools. She said shortages of pizza dough, fruits, vegetables, and other staples have become routine, as have higher costs and labor constraints. “September has been rough.”

Laura Benavidez, executive director of food and nutritional services at Boston Public Schools, which serves over 35,000 meals daily, said this school year has been a string of supply chain headaches. This week, build-your-own nacho bars were reimagined as taco rice bowls when whole grain chips didn’t arrive. Spaghetti and meatballs became meatball subs when they ran out of pasta.



Head cook Sue Demis prepared lunch at Watertown Middle School. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

“You order,” she said. “Then you hope and pray that whatever you order shows up on the truck.”

Labor shortages are largely to blame for a problem: There aren't pickers to harvest food, drivers to haul it, or warehouse workers to distribute it. In Boston Public Schools, more than one in every five positions for food service workers is currently vacant, said Benavidez, which means some school kitchens that once had three or four cooks making food from scratch are down to one staff member serving prepackaged meals. And prepackaged meal vendors face supply chain issues of their own, she said, meaning that yes, Boston's been plagued by pizza problems too.

“We got calls from our staff saying there's no pizza and I was like, ‘What?!’ ” Benavidez said, shaking her head. “No one is immune to this.”

It's a challenge facing districts across the country. Missouri schools have been [buying frozen pizzas and hot dogs](#) from Sam's Club. In Dallas, they can't find flatware or plates. Carrots and antibiotic-free chicken are hard to come by in New York. In Philadelphia, [school kids have gone hungry](#) due to cafeteria staffing shortages. In one Alabama district, [administrators told](#) parents they might send kids home for remote learning to “alleviate the stress on our food supplies.”



A lunch line at Watertown Middle School on Thursday. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

School meal programs have always been a critical source of calories for food-insecure children, and

the crisis comes at a moment when more kids than ever are relying on school food for meals, said Erin McAleer, the president of the hunger advocacy group Project Bread. The nonprofit has been

encouraging districts to be transparent about what's going on in school kitchens and has been offering training and recipe development tips to help employees think on the fly when their order of chicken or corn isn't delivered.

"We're hearing it across the state," she said. It's gotten so tough that there are "a lot of school nutrition directors who are right now working the line in the cafeteria preparing food."

"It's a huge problem," said Deb Mugford, president of the School Nutrition Association of Massachusetts. "It's crazy, we're all frustrated and it's nationwide. All we're trying to do is make sure we're feeding the kids."

She said that while supply chain issues span industries, K-12 school meal programs are unique in that they must meet US Department of Agriculture nutrition regulations. Yet when she goes out to bid, many of her vendors don't have products that meet the guidelines.

The USDA has offered some leniency to schools, and Mugford said she's gotten support from the Massachusetts Department of Education. But there are still issues such as storage problems: Small schools don't have the refrigeration capacity to keep stockpiles of frozen nuggets on hand as a backup for when deliveries don't arrive.

In response to the supply chain crisis, the USDA said on Wednesday that it would [provide \\$1.5 billion](#) in additional assistance to schools to help manage disruptions. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack called it an "all-hands-on-deck approach."

Yet other USDA efforts to stem food insecurity during the pandemic are, in fact, contributing to the strain. The agency vastly expanded free meals this year, meaning more kids are eating in the cafeteria instead of packing lunch from home.

"We're serving more meals to more kids than we ever have," said Aaron LaMotte, the vice president of supply chain management for North America at Sodexo, a food service provider for districts including Springfield and Fitchburg. "If you add all that up it leads to significant distribution challenges."

In Watertown, for example, the district served 1,100 meals daily before the pandemic. Now it's serving more than 2,000. And it's just the latest hurdle that Brandon Rabbitt, the district's director of

school nutrition, has had to clear.

When Watertown Public Schools closed its doors back in March 2020, Rabbitt jumped into action, creating a curbside meal pickup program within a week. When Watertown went hybrid, he sent bagged lunches home so kids would have food for the days they weren't in school. When in-person full-day classes resumed, so did in-person meals. Trying to coordinate outdoor dining was complicated. But all told, Watertown schools served over 430,000 meals last year.

When summer hit, Rabbitt got a reprieve. He started meal-planning, mapping out a menu and placing orders, thinking the fall would calm down. That menu went home and was hung on fridges. But Rabbitt had no idea what he was in for.

Since the start of the school year, supply chain issues have [wreaked havoc on his plans](#).

There aren't enough drivers to bring milk. The grocery distributor pulled out of its contract. His vendors are tacking on \$11 in "COVID fees" for every \$40 case of chicken. Sporks are on back order for months. Parents complained when their kids were served ham and cheese croissants that were still frozen — a meal schedule staggered to meet COVID restrictions means lunches start at 10:15 and they didn't have time to defrost. On Tuesday, Rabbit spent most of the day trying to find trays, or anything really, that he could use to physically serve meals. At one point, he was pricing out plates at BJ's before he finally found a vendor.

"This is the hardest year ever doing this," Rabbitt said. "We didn't realize until the first week of school how bad it really was."

Complicating matters further for Rabbitt is that Russo's — the beloved Watertown market that closed two weeks ago — had a contract to supply produce to Watertown and nearly 100 districts throughout the state. Its closure has districts scrambling for fruits and vegetables, said Simca Horwitz, the codirector of the Massachusetts Farm to School program.

"It's another unexpected consequence of the really sudden closure" of the store, she said.

Now, with Russo's gone, the Massachusetts Area Planning Council has stepped in to find a new produce vendor, she said, "but because Russo's has already stopped delivering to schools, there is this lag in terms of putting a new contract in place."

McAleer said the vast array of issues has not deterred the dedicated food service workers who care deeply about getting healthful, balanced meals to kids. And she hopes it won't deter parents from taking advantage of the universal meal programs, which her organization says should be extended beyond the pandemic. Schools are reimbursed for every meal a student eats, she said, "which is money from the federal government they can use to hire more staff and source local produce."

And no matter what the challenge, the school meal teams are ready to meet it to ensure kids get fed, said Benavidez.

"Not having options is not an option for us."

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