

By Bill Husfelt

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We all remember “the good old days” of lunches at school and I think we can all fondly reminisce about fried chicken, giant cinnamon rolls and fluffy, fresh-out-of-the-oven yeast rolls. As a Bay High graduate myself, I can still remember those items being served in our cafeteria and I certainly wish our students could have some of those same memories. I was one of the students smart enough to become GOOD friends with the lunch ladies.

While those days are long gone, I think it’s important to remember that it’s the FEDERAL government’s guidelines that changed when it comes to school food service, NOT a local desire to ban fried chicken and fluffy rolls. We all know that obesity is an issue in our country and I do applaud efforts to ensure our children have healthy options for school breakfast and lunch BUT I, like many of you, still miss the iconic menu items of my childhood. Currently, in line with the guidelines and requirements, we fry NOTHING and no items like those ooey-goey cinnamon rolls oozing with sugary icing are permitted.

The good news is that the guidelines are adjusting a little bit and some items we haven’t seen in a while are coming back onto menus as the federal rules change yet again. With the grain waiver, for example, we’ve been able to add whole wheat breakfast biscuits back into the rotation along with additional seasonings and other spices. Before you get too excited, we aren’t going to give Hardees or Chick-Fil-A a run for their money YET but these biscuits are pretty delicious and I am glad to see them back in the rotation.

We do hear lots of concerns from parents about portion sizes and we want you to know that those are also set by federal guidelines. In fact, those guidelines are ever-changing and you can follow along with the proposed, and new, rules at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-020722>. Of course, we want our children to eat heartily at lunchtime and we want to do all we can to ensure that happens BUT we can’t deviate from the federal guidelines and portion sizes. Fines for non-compliance are hefty and obviously that’s not an area where we want to spend our money!

We are very grateful for our dedicated food-service team and all of the creativity they are bringing back into the school lunch plans. Our high schools are enjoying “student choice” events and we love to see our students trying new foods like pho (that’s a fancy word for a noodle bowl to you and I BUT you’d be surprised how many students know, and love, this item), spicy chicken and Hispanic-inspired cuisine. Our younger students are also experiencing some school choice events and are constantly being enticed to try new foods like sprouts, kiwi fruit and other fruits and vegetables not in the normal rotation. It’s a lot of fun to watch kids trying new foods and we’re so proud of all of those who are adventurous enough to taste something unfamiliar. I was reading to the kindergartners at Lynn Haven Elementary recently and I asked them to tell me one of their favorite menu items ... overwhelming they all answered “broccoli” which was a surprise but great to hear.

Currently, our food service contract is out for bid again. If you’re interested, you can view all of the details (and requirements) at <https://www.bay.k12.fl.us/uploads/Bids/RFP%2022-03%20-%20School%20Food%20Management%20Services.pdf>. It will be up to the School Board to review the

bids received and to choose the best vendor for our community for the upcoming school year and beyond.

Looking at last month's numbers, Chartwells served 89,245 breakfasts, 204,231 lunches and 9,943 snacks to our students. These meals are provided at no charge to our families thanks to a governmental waiver. Those numbers may not surprise you but did you know Chartwells also serves an average of 10,000 "suppers" (late afternoon meals) each month to students in our qualifying extended day programs? So some students eat all three of their daily meals with us at school during the week.

No food service vendor is ever going to be able to mass produce meals that remind us of grandma's cooking, or even the lunches we remember as children, because tastes, guidelines and portion sizes have all changed since then. The government is easing the sodium restrictions a little bit but I doubt regular fryers will be allowed back in our kitchens any time soon. And that's not all bad ... our children need healthy options, ready access to fresh fruits and vegetables and a chance to try new foods more than they need everything fried most of the time. Sometimes, however, you just need a piece of fried chicken or some fresh, crispy fries!

We look forward to opening the bids and reviewing the companies that would like to serve our children. We know that children can't learn if they are hungry and we want to do all we can to provide our students with the very best food service options possible.

Stay safe and God Bless!