



## INTERNATIONAL UNION OF OPERATING ENGINEERS

Classified School Employees Union, Local 609, A.F.L.-C.I.O  
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Dr. Denise Juneau, Superintendent  
Seattle Public Schools  
MS32-150  
2445 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave S  
Seattle, WA 98134

Dr. Juneau,

As you know our members are dedicated professionals that take pride every day in feeding Seattle students, so they are ready to learn and succeed in our District and beyond.

At our General Membership meeting this last Saturday several issues arose from the floor of the Local regarding leadership of the Nutrition Services Department. You are familiar with many of them as we have been communicating them to you for weeks now. We will review them here as well as other issues that have just now been brought to our attention.

But first some background.

Our members have been advocating for major changes in the meal program for several years. In 2009 the District scrapped scratch cooking at secondary schools and went to a model of bulk product from our Central Kitchen. We fought this move and warned of drops in meal participation. The participation drops came to pass the following year. Since then we have been advocating for fresher ingredients, higher quality meal options, a return to scratch cooking. Our membership, the most diverse workforce in the District has called for a more diverse menu that appeals to the diverse student clientele at SPS. We have also pushed for updated staffing models, streamlined ordering and support processes as well as innovative delivery methods so we can serve kids where they congregate rather than just in a central lunchroom model.

Our members are not against change. We've been clamoring for it for years.

In 2016 former Assistant Superintendent Pegi McEvoy commissioned a top down review of the department, now colloquially referred to the Prismatic study. It was a thorough review and our

members enthusiastically participated. Our membership endorsed virtually every recommendation from menu adjustments, management restructuring, training, and longer lunch periods for students to name just a few.

We have also endorsed modifications as presented by the Council of Greater City Schools. In addition to these studies we have in the past worked hand in hand with Ms. McEvoy, Executive Director of Coordinated School Health Pat Sander, and former Nutrition Service Director Theresa Fields on implementing several programmatic changes over the years.

We appreciate that the District has begun to undertake some of these reforms however proper execution is critical. The current leadership of the NS Department has utterly failed in planning, stakeholder engagement, execution, and above all communication.

We were shocked when Director of Nutrition Services Aaron Smith announced at the end of year meetings in June that pre-purchased, frozen sandwiches would be served to students. The “grab and go” sandwiches that our Central Kitchen and school kitchens make fresh daily are very popular with students. A move to a frozen product flies in the face of statements Mr. Smith has made that he wants to improve selections and offer fresher products. Prepackaged, frozen turkey subs and sun-butter and jelly sandwiches have been served in the opening weeks of this school year. Many of our members are embarrassed to serve these very low-quality items. We have received complaints from parents and staff. They are described by students as having a “strange dark color”, a “bad smell”, “bad taste” and “gross”. Needless to say this is not winning over customers to the meal program.

Our members were also shocked when Mr. Smith let go two key personnel that worked diligently behind the scenes supporting our members (and by extension students), Ms. Dorgan and Ms. Marrison. To make matters worse no research was done by Mr. Smith to learn their daily tasks prior to them leaving and no forethought went into covering the gap after they left. Key functions such as daily short-term assignments of staff (dispatch) and the ordering of food. As an aside, Prismatic recommended a Purchasing Specialist position be created. Former Director Theresa Fields put such a person in place but under a different job title. That person was let go and we are now suffering through food shortages at schools. Schools all over the District are now struggling to feed students because they do not have food to serve.

Our members have been forced to cobble together meals as best they can. The menu says Chicken Alfredo, but it becomes penne pasta with red sauce and meatballs because the schools received no chicken and no alfredo. At our meeting it was inspiring to watch members make logistics plans to share food and paper products amongst schools, plans to ferry product before and after shifts, so schools will have *something* to feed students. Ingredients are being purchased out of pocket and when it is reported veiled threats of discipline come from

downtown. Vegan options have seemingly been eliminated. This week some schools may not have food to serve at all, others may only have cold cereal as a lunch option. No bread, no yogurt, no chicken, no beef, no dressing, no fries, no pizza, the list goes on and on.

The face of the Nutrition Department, our members, face angry students and parents with no back up from administration. Special needs kids that rely on consistency have been left out in the cold and are struggling. Principals are contacting us to ask what is going on and when will the Department get its act together.

Mr. Smith's re-organization was poorly timed and not thought out. New department administrators are at a loss as to how to answer concerns because they do not know the systems that Kitchen Managers rely on for their supply of product.

As you are aware United Way has pulled funding for Breakfast After the Bell. This is a severe blow to the high free and reduced schools. The program blossomed under Fields and McEvoy. We worked closely with United Way and SPS to increase the number of schools involved. We can only assume that the current lack of departmental leadership has led United Way to choose spend their limited resources in Districts that can better implement the program. In addition to this loss it appears that the District has discontinued the Fresh Fruits and Vegetables program.

**Please remember that for many students the only meals they get are ones they get at school. Leadership is letting these families down.**

Other problems include the following; routine work requests on equipment, including refrigeration equipment have gone unheeded, several members returned to their assignments this year only to find that the documented safety concerns have gone unaddressed over the summer, support for technology and pos systems is all but non-existent.

Let me reiterate, we are not opposed to change. Managing change is a skill set however and Mr. Smith lacks those skills. Effectuating change is far more than reciting a list of feel good phrases to the press ("fresher food", "higher quality"), it means doing the work. Engaging stakeholders. Planning. Investing time and effort. **Communicating**. He has shown an inability or an unwillingness to communicate. Our members cannot articulate Smith's vision because it has not been articulated to them. As we try to work through the dozens of issues that have arisen over the last month Smith has simply not shown up for many meetings. Instead of dealing with the crisis at hand he has been found, by me, in one of our smaller elementary schools washing dishes. That smacks of hiding from the problem. We feel a leader should be dealing with the problem at hand, not hiding from it.

Our members report that they don't know who key personnel are and how to contact them for support. They do not know what roles and responsibilities these new administrators have. Our

members have seen prior agreements, procedures and past practices trampled without even a conversation about them. The agreed upon process for substitution and step up for workers is not being followed. It is disrespectful. The utter lack of communication has led to a number of our members *to resign in lieu of working under these conditions.*

**For the reasons outlined above the membership of Local 609 passed a motion of no confidence in the leadership abilities of Nutrition Service Director Aaron Smith.** We do not take this action lightly. We stand willing to help effectuate needed change in the Department but we currently have no partner in Director Smith. We hope we can work through these issues over the coming months but we know long term damage to the program has already occurred. The program has lost many students and we may not get them back for years if at all. Many students are now leaving campus to eat. Some of them won't return for the second half of the day.

Our members, students, parents, and all tax payers deserve better than this.

Sincerely,



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cc: School Board Office  
Fred Podesta, Chief Operations Officer  
Clover Codd, Chief Human Resource Officer