

## **Tainted Food on the Rise In Cafeterias**

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Allegations that bureaucratic lapses allowed deliveries of ammonia-tainted meals to schools across Illinois last year are spurring calls for a shake-up of the complex web of agencies and rules intended to protect the nation's students from dangerous food.

Outbreaks of food-borne illness are on the rise in U.S. schools-increasing by 10 percent a year in the 1990s-even as recent federal health data show a significant decrease in food poisoning in the general population from dangerous bacteria such as E. coli and salmonella.

Reports in recent years suggest the blame for that disparity can't be easily assigned to any one public or private entity. Food poisonings in schools have been traced to poor hygiene in processing plants, improper storage and heating of food in school kitchens, and even the unwashed hands of students.

But in 59 of the largest outbreaks of such illnesses in schools from 1990 through 1999, roughly two-thirds, or 40 incidents, were traced to food provided through the federal school meal programs, according to a U.S. General Accounting Office report scheduled for release this week. Those meals, served to 28 million children daily, are ultimately the responsibility of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Given the USDA's prominent role in the distribution of food to schools and the upcoming reauthorization of the federal School Lunch Program, members of Congress and watchdog groups are increasingly calling on the department to account for safety gaps.

"I think most parents believe the food their children are being served in school is closely watched over and that someone-the federal government, at least-would pull that food if it's not safe. That's simply not the case," U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., said in a recent interview.

USDA officials dispute such charges. They point, for example, to the department's decision last week to begin allowing schools to order irradiated ground beef next January for the federal meal programs, which serve both lunch and breakfast.

"Our only motivation is ensuring that the foods supplied to everyone in the country, most of all our children, are the safest they can be," the USDA's undersecretary for food, nutrition, and consumer services, Eric M. Bost, said in a press conference last week.

### **Lawsuits in Illinois**

Rep. Schakowsky said she became convinced the federal government's food-safety system was broken when she learned of the alleged oversights in her state, which came to light only after 42 students and two teachers who ate chicken tenders laced with ammonia at a Joliet, Ill., elementary school last November suffered from burning throats, stomach pains, nausea, headaches, and diarrhea.

In connection with that incident, two state education officials who oversee the Illinois school lunch program were charged in April with 45 counts of reckless conduct, a criminal misdemeanor.

Jeff Tomczak, the Will County state's attorney, accused the officials of ignoring warnings that food sent to schools was tainted during an ammonia leak at a storage facility in St. Louis in 2001.

Lawyers for some of the Joliet victims say Agriculture Department inspectors also turned a blind eye to the seriousness of the contamination and allowed the food to be delivered to schools.

"That's absolutely false," said Steven Cohen, the spokesman for the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service. Decisions about how to treat the contaminated food and whether to ship it were made largely by Illinois education officials, he said.

The attorneys filed suit against the Agriculture Department in federal court last month for "improperly withholding documents" that they believe would show whether USDA employees knowingly allowed the contaminated food to be shipped to Illinois schools.

"We don't know everything yet about who's at fault, and part of the reason for that is that not all the agencies involved are cooperating and fulfilling their responsibility to disclose information to the public," said David W. Babcock, a lawyer with the Seattle-based personal-injury firm Marler Clark.

Mr. Cohen said the USDA has a policy of not responding to requests for information that pertain to ongoing investigations.

Rep. Schakowsky and fellow Democrats Sen. Richard J. Durbin of Illinois and Rep. Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut sent a letter to U.S. Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman on April 29, requesting a meeting to discuss "an apparent failure by the USDA to adequately regulate food served in the school lunch program."

The lawmakers were still waiting for a response from the department late last week, a delay Rep. Schakowsky called "troubling."

### **Legislative Reaction**

The Joliet incident has reinvigorated criticism sparked last year by a *Chicago Tribune* investigation that revealed widespread safety violations in the processing plants that produce food for school meals and in the kitchens and cafeterias that serve them.

Those reports were followed by studies from the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, that showed an increase in the incidents of food poisoning in K-12 schools. The problem may be worse than the studies show, according to the GAO, because food-related illnesses, including those associated with school meals, are underreported.

The GAO's chief recommendation, opposed by the USDA and industry groups, was for Congress to streamline the patchwork system of agencies, laws, and regulations "that hampers efforts to adequately address existing and emerging food safety risks." ("Congress: Too Many Cooks Oversee Food Safety," [/ew/newstory.cfm?slug=34food.h21](#) May 8, 2002.)

Two different federal agencies track food contamination and respond to outbreaks of foodborne illnesses. The Agriculture Department and various USDA branches monitor meat, poultry, and egg products, while the Food and Drug Administration is responsible for most other foods.

Neither agency has the power to recall products.

Also, while the USDA imposes strict safety requirements on the vendors it buys food from for the national school meal programs, it doesn't share those requirements with schools even though districts purchase 80 percent of the food for the federal programs directly from local suppliers, according to the GAO report.

The GAO has recommended that the USDA offer schools guidance for contracting with food vendors, share information about the safety-compliance records of food suppliers with school districts and states, and take a more active role in disseminating proven practices for proper handling, storage, and preparation of food in school kitchens.

Sen. Durbin and Rep. Schakowsky introduced companion bills in Congress this year that would act on many of the GAO's recommendations. Their proposed legislation, called the Safe School

Lunch Act, would allow the USDA to recall contaminated food that posed a serious health risk. The bill would also require the department to notify states that they were in possession of contaminated food, and mandate that the states pass on that warning to all schools within 24 hours.

### Hygiene Faulted

Industry officials argue that the legislation, however well-intentioned, won't help.

"It misses the boat entirely-this [proposal] isn't even close to solving the problem of food safety in schools," said Steve F. Krut, the executive director of the American Association of Meat Processors, based in Elizabethtown, Pa.

Poor hygiene and inadequate training are the biggest threats in school cafeterias, Mr. Krut argued. He and other industry officials, as well as the GAO report due out this week, recommend that the federal government explore ways to offer standardized food-safety training for cafeteria and kitchen employees in schools.

"The fact is that 97 percent of all foodborne illness occurs beyond the point of manufacturing," Mr. Krut said. "I'm not saying there isn't a need for legislation, but the bigger issue is that we don't have an understanding ... of how to safely handle and prepare food."

GAO investigators found that 19 of the 40 outbreaks related to the federal school meal programs that they studied were caused by "improper handling practices" in schools, while only eight of the outbreaks resulted from foods contaminated before delivery or a combination of outside contamination and in-school mishandling.

The poor practices found in schools with food-poisoning outbreaks included undercooking of food, improper storing and cooling of food, poor hygiene among food-service workers, and preparation of meals by sick workers.

Erik Peterson, the spokesman for the American School Food Service Association in Alexandria, Va., said those incidents should be "viewed in the context of 33 million meals served each day through the [national school meal programs]. Over the 10 years in question, approximately 57.75 billion school meals were served."

Mr. Bost, the head of the Agriculture Department's food, nutrition, and consumer services division, said the USDA will recommend that Congress consider requiring standardized safety plans and worker training for school food- service operations when it renews the national school meal programs. The ASFSA also supports those proposals.

In Mississippi and many other states, national certification is a requirement for school food-service managers.

"Having a trained and certified manager is absolutely essential for a school to receive an operating permit for food service," said Charlene W. Bruce, the director of food protection for the Mississippi health department.

Ms. Bruce credits the low rate of foodborne illness outbreaks in Mississippi schools to the fact that all districts abide by a single set of state regulations, which include the requirement for a certified food manager. Her division also conducts regular inspections-announced and unannounced-to make sure those rules are being followed.

From 2000 through 2002, at least 115 of 967 Mississippi school cafeterias failed state inspections whenever they didn't comply with one or more of the state's safety regulations. The biggest problems stem from aging buildings, Ms. Bruce said, where rodent and insect infestations and sewage problems are more common.

'Operation Clean Sweep'

Old buildings are also a contributing factor in many of the food-safety problems that have cropped up in District of Columbia schools. Superintendent Paul L. Vance declared that one in four of the city's 152 public school cafeterias "failed" inspection this academic year.

City health inspectors issue such findings for school cafeterias only when conditions pose an "imminent danger" to students' health. Mr. Vance decided last fall to take a tougher stance with his own program, called "Operation Clean Sweep," to combat problems that he said stemmed from poor sanitation and from inattention and indifference.

Wendy A. Gee, the director of management services for the 63,000-student school system, said most of the health department's citations stemmed from aging kitchens and cafeterias with outdated equipment, rodent and insect infestations, and poor sanitation.

Responsibility for some of these issues clearly rests with the school district, which has lacked the money to improve old buildings and update kitchens and cafeterias in many of the district's aging schools, Ms. Gee said.

Those problems aside, however, Ms. Gee said school staff members were at fault in roughly 20 percent of the violations. When problems persisted at one high school even after warnings from the health department, the district placed several employees on paid leave in the fall and eventually demoted one.

Still, the school system hasn't had an outbreak of food poisoning in at least three years, Ms. Gee said.

To maintain that record, school district officials allow elementary schools to serve only meals that are precooked to proper temperatures by a contractor, a practice some safety experts and food vendors say the USDA should encourage.

By eliminating the need for cooking from scratch with raw ingredients, proponents of the precooking process say schools can reduce their chances of serving contaminated food and streamline costly kitchen operations.

The Agriculture Department already purchases some precooked meat and poultry products for

school meal programs. But USDA officials warn that those foods are more expensive and could reduce the overall amount of commodities the department can donate to school districts, according to the GAO's new report.

### The Irradiation Debate

Agriculture Department officials offered the GAO the same caution about the potential costs of a more controversial technique backed by the food-processing industry and approved by Congress for use in the federal school meal programs: irradiation.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calls irradiation "a promising new food safety technology that can eliminate disease-causing germs from foods" by bombarding them with gamma rays, electron beams, or X-rays.

The CDC, the American Dietetic Association, the American Medical Association, and the World Health Organization have all declared irradiation a safe and effective method for ridding meat and poultry of dangerous foodborne pathogens such as E. coli and salmonella.

Irradiated-meat products are also sold in supermarkets across the country, but they're not yet served in schools.

That could change next year, when the USDA adds irradiated ground beef to the list of commodities schools can order for federally subsidized student meals.

Other groups-citing studies that suggest irradiation saps food of valuable nutrients and could cause cancer-argue that more investigation is needed before the federal government allows irradiated food to be served to millions of schoolchildren.

Agriculture Department officials say the technology is safe.

However, even advocates of irradiation acknowledge that the method won't counter all the food hazards in schools.

"We think [irradiation] is a good tool, but it's not a silver bullet," said Mr. Krut of the American Association of Meat Processors. "It only makes the food safer at the manufacturing end of the supply chain. Any time a packaged product is opened again, it can be recontaminated."