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## 6 MONTHS AFTER THE GREAT KANAWHA FOOD FIGHT


 THE SHAPE WE'RE IN


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Six months after last October's school food fight, Pratt Elementary head cook, Darla Gue (second from left) said she worked long hours last fall, "because that was what was best for the kids," but the changeover "happened too quickly, and a lot of people felt a bit overwhelmed." Things are going well now, she said.

## Fewer kids ate; schools lost money

### Duerring: 'We're backing up and trying again'

By Kate Long  
Staff writer

LAST AUGUST, all 261 Kanawha County school cooks were abruptly ordered to quit serving prepackaged food and cook instead, from scratch, with fresh ingredients, five days a week.

They were given little warning, and no extra training.

By October, protesting school cooks packed Kanawha school board meetings. They made headlines for weeks. At some schools, students quit eating school meals in droves.

Six months later, the Kanawha County schools superintendent says the county should have trained the cooks first. The school board president blames the cooks, and the interim food service director says some cooks sabotaged the food.

"In retrospect, we were a bit too ag-

gressive," Superintendent Ron Duerring said in March. "We were trying to follow the state's push for healthier meals, but I think maybe we should have tackled it a little more slowly and done a little more training with our cooks on cooking from scratch."

With fewer students eating, Kanawha County's food program is projected to make about \$350,000 less than it did the previous year, according to the state Department of Education.

With fixed labor costs, the county must make up part of that shortfall. During the fracas, the county also lost \$96,000 in federal revenue because it neglected to send in applications for free and reduced-cost meals in a timely fashion, state records show.

School board President Pete Thaw still blames the cooks. "All that hell-raising at the beginning of the year was caused by the cooks, in my opinion," he told the Gazette in March. "Some of

them are lazy, and they didn't want to change the way they were doing things. They'd much rather just unload the truck of processed food, take it out of the freezer, put it in the microwave and serve it."

Cooks reacted in different ways, said Tammy Walker, interim child nutrition director. "We have a lot of wonderful veteran cooks who said, 'OK, I can do this.'"

But Thaw is right about others, she said. "We also had some who realized scratch cooking was more work, and they didn't want to do it, so when they prepared a lot of items, they left ingredients and steps out so it wouldn't taste good."

"At one school, for instance, they served a pizza that's supposed to be finely sliced, sautéed vegetables with melted cheese. Instead, they piled



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Kanawha County  
schools superintendent



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Kanawha County interim child  
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PETE THAW  
President, Kanawha County  
Board of Education

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# FOOD FIGHT

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chunks of raw vegetables and cheese on it, about three or four inches high, and called it scratch cooking. Well, no wonder the kids didn't like it. At another school, they left the sugar out of the brownies."

"I don't believe that for one second," said Jackie Long, president of the West Virginia School Service Personnel Association. "These cooks love the students, and they wouldn't do that."

The number of Kanawha students eating school meals is gradually rising, but is not yet back to last year's level. "I'm hopeful that we can make up the [\$350,000] over time," Duerling said. "We are backing up and trying again."

The county is hiring a new food service director. "The ideal candidate will be committed to change," the advertisement said.

## What can be learned?

To put the Kanawha episode in perspective, it makes sense to go back to 2009, when British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver landed in Huntington with his TV reality show, vowing to whip Cabell County into healthier, skinnier shape.

He set up camp for three months at Central City Elementary School, where he attacked breakfast pizza, processed meat full of chemicals, and high-sugar flavored milk.

One in three West Virginians is already obese, Oliver told his international audience. Obesity leads to diabetes, heart disease, strokes. "If you want to make a difference, start with what the kids are eating," he said.

He did not mention that the Cabell high schools already had salad bars. Soda pop and junk food sales were banned from schools. Cooks were baking with whole-grain flour — but they also used a lot of prepackaged, processed food.

Food service director Rhonda McCoy had a long-term plan to get rid of processed food, she said. "You can't change the



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"We want to reduce processed food and cook fresh as much as we can," said Tammy Walker, interim child nutrition director. The Pratt taco salad bar offers students a variety of fresh ingredients, but the burritos feature pre-processed chicken bits. "It's a process," Walker said. "We're moving forward."

menu all at once and expect kids and parents won't revolt."

Oliver stirred up awareness and aggravation and won over Central's hostile cooks. "That meant we could move faster at that school," McCoy said. Central started cooking from scratch five days a week. But Oliver was leaving, and there were 23 other schools.

## Enter Kanawha County

Cabell Huntington Hospital stepped in and paid Oliver's behind-the-scenes crew — three chefs from Connecticut-based Sustainable Food Systems — \$100,000 to stay for the rest of the year. In six months, they trained the cooks at all Cabell County schools. "People called us the reality behind the reality show," said head chef John Turenne.

They spent a week at each school. "We'd walk in the back door of the kitchen on Monday morning at 4:30 a.m. and face these looks of fear in the cooks'

eyes," Turenne said. "But by Friday, we were getting hugs, kisses, school T-shirts, email addresses."

Today, Cabell County schools cook from scratch five days a week with mostly fresh ingredients. Their food gets rave reviews from visiting journalists.

New York freelance writer Jane Black, a food critic who is co-writing a book about the Oliver episode, recently blogged that "Cabell County's efforts prove that, with real cooks in the kitchen, good food can be produced on a shoestring."

In late spring 2010, "April Hamilton and some Kanawha County colleagues showed up in Huntington and asked if we would come over to Kanawha County and see how we could help out," Turenne said.

The women, part of the Holz Elementary School wellness committee, formed a fundraising group called Launching a New Lunch and raised \$14,000 for

the assessment.

"It was incredibly easy to raise that money," said Paige Payne, director of Charleston Montessori School. "People right away said, 'Oh, yes, we've got a problem. I'll contribute to that.'"

So, in October 2010, Turenne and two other chefs looked at Kanawha County school kitchens and menus and talked with cooks for a week. They met with the superintendent, school board members and food service director.

They pitched a two-part plan: (1) train cooks and educate teachers and kids at seven schools: start small, work out kinks, get recipes and suppliers, etc. then (2) roll it out to all 70 Kanawha County schools.

The price tag was \$68,000 for the seven-school pilot. The 70-school rollout was \$400,000. "But we told them the cost would be drastically less if their own people did the total-system training," Turenne said. "We do

the pilot, they do the rest."

Don't skip the training, he warned. "The food is only one part of what must be done to succeed. You also need to train everyone and get buy-in from your cooks, students and administrators," he said.

"We offered to raise the money to pay for it," Hamilton said. "I stood before the board, and when Pete Thaw said, 'Mrs. Hamilton, have you come to ask us for money?' I said, 'No, I want to give you money. We just want your permission to raise money.'"

"They never gave us permission," she said.

Asked why Kanawha County took no action, Thaw said, "Oh yeah, they brought in a chef from Timbuktu. It cost too much. It's that simple. It was too expensive."

Yes, he said, Launching a New Lunch offered to raise the money. "But we weren't sure the federal government would sign off. And these outfits never show you all their cards. They always have a hidden cost."

Meanwhile, the national Boy Scouts have hired Turenne's group to plan the food for Fayette County's new national Boy Scout Summit.

"It's really discouraging," Payne said. "We were willing to raise the money for the entire program, but it wasn't welcome. It's almost as if they fight not to change."

"They could have been in great position last fall. All that didn't need to happen."

## All heck broke loose

In summer 2011, seven other counties — Lincoln, Clay, Gilmer, Fayette, Mingo, Mason, McDowell — volunteered for the state's school nutrition pilot project.

They agreed to cook breakfast and lunch from scratch five days a week for a year, serve free breakfast and lunch to all students, and train all cooks.

Kanawha County was not included as a whole in the program, but one school, West Side Elementary, was.

In August, Cabell County cooks trained cooks from the pi-

lot counties. They taught them tricks of healthy cooking for hundreds of kids. "We went home and duplicated the training for all our cooks," said Mingo County food services director Kay Maynard. "When school started, we were ready to go, with recipes we knew kids would like."

There have been no protests in those counties. Instead, the number of students eating breakfast has nearly doubled. They brought in more than a million extra federal dollars in the first four months.

In Kanawha County, after the administration ordered cooks to cook from scratch, "all heck broke loose," Hamilton recalled.

Thaw keeps claiming the federal government made Kanawha County do it. "Absolutely not," said James Harmon, regional director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "We don't dictate how the meal is prepared."

Did the state make them do it? "No," said Rick Goff, director of the state Office of Child Nutrition. "We would not have wanted them to do it without training the cooks."

All that's in the past, says Superintendent Duerring, and it's "time to turn the page." Gary Cochran, the former food service director, resigned.

"We've advertised for a new child nutrition director. We have qualified applicants and hope to hire soon," Duerring said.

The school board has added \$20,000 to the director's salary, bringing it up to about \$82,000 to run the \$18 million program. "We want to hire somebody good," Duerring said. "The state wants us to cook more from scratch and wants more healthy foods, and so do we."

Next summer, Kanawha County will send some cooks to the state's cooking camp, he said. "But to get all 70 schools trained is a big initiative, so we'll have to do other trainings to reach all of our cooks. It can't happen overnight, but it will happen."

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