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Congress of the United States House of Representatives

October 8, 2021

The Honorable Cindy Long
Administrator
United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service
3101 Park Center Drive
Alexandria, VA 22302

Dear Administrator Long:

Thank you for your continued work to strengthen our nation's food systems and expand our emergency food network so states, schools, and food banks can reliably serve communities in need. Following outreach from my office, I appreciate your department's prompt attention to deeply troubling reports regarding wholly substandard meals being fed to students in the Paterson Public School District (PPSD). We can and must do better for our students.

On September 21, pictures surfaced online of 'mystery meat' and improperly prepared cheesesteak being served in the cafeteria at International High School in Paterson, prompting immediate responses from PPSD that action would be taken.¹ Just a week later, on September 30, pictures of only a single slice of processed turkey and carrots being served to kindergartners² at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Educational Complex in Paterson surfaced, rightly outraging our community. The meals being fed to our students fall short of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs.³

Through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), all PPSD students are eligible to receive a healthy breakfast and lunch at no charge as part of the USDA's National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Guaranteeing no student ever goes hungry or malnourished is a cornerstone of our public education system. School meal funding comes from the federal government, and it is imperative these dollars are being spent to feed our children the nutritious meals they need to learn and grow.

Based on conversations my office has had with the superintendent of PPSD, I am hopeful the district will rectify the situation. On September 30, PPSD announced all food service department workers would be re-trained on meal preparation, complete meal trays representing

¹ <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/paterson-press/2021/09/21/paterson-school-lunch-photos-spur-calls-changes/5802286001/>

² <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/paterson-press/2021/10/01/more-paterson-nj-school-lunch-photos-surface/5934115001/>

³ 7 CFR Parts 210 and 220

each food group would be provided, a full assessment of PPSD's food services provider would be conducted, and oversight of meal preparation for quality control would be instituted.⁴

The guidance, technical assistance, and oversight that USDA and the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA) have provided to PPSD is critical to ensuring that corrective action is taken and deficient meals are never again served to Paterson students. I ask that your office stay in touch with NJDA and PPSD to make certain that these necessary steps are effectuated to bring Paterson school meals up to federal standards. Please keep my office updated regarding any developments. We must be certain federal dollars supporting free school breakfast and lunch are put to proper use, and the unacceptable meals we've seen in Paterson of late do not reappear.

Again, thank you to you and your staff for your continued attention to protecting our children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bill Pascrell Jr." in a cursive style.

Bill Pascrell, Jr.
Member of Congress

⁴ <https://www.tapinto.net/towns/paterson/sections/education/articles/superintendent-eileen-shafer-offers-plan-to-make-paterson-school-lunches-nutritious-and-appetizing>