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By Tania Savayan, The (Westchester County, N.Y.) Journal News

Leroy Prescod washes a bin in the new three-bay sink at Eastchester Middle School. Since \$102,000 was spent renovating the kitchen, there have been no health code violations

In New York, a model for how to improve a school cafeteria

By Ernie Garcia and Cathey O'Donnell Special to, USA TODAY

HARRISON, N.Y. — The cafeteria of Eastchester Middle School had run afoul of the public health code for several years. Between 2006 and 2008, county inspectors found repeated food-safety violations: cold cuts stored at incorrect temperatures, no proper sink for sanitizing kitchenware and employees without required certification.

When some of those "unacceptable" mistakes weren't corrected between inspections, the Westchester County Department of Health took a rare step: After a

hearing in May 2008, the county fined cafeteria contractor Aramark \$3,450. Aramark, a food services company that manages school and corporate cafeterias across the nation, lost the contract to manage all of Eastchester's schools the following summer to a lower bidder.

The school district itself began to tackle the difficult and expensive task of bringing the middle school's 80-year-old kitchen into compliance with the law. Voters twice had turned down bond issues to upgrade school buildings. But last summer, the Eastchester Union School District spent \$102,000 to revamp the school's kitchen. It installed new stainless-steel tables, stoves and refrigerators. It added the required three-bay sink. It hired a new food service director.

TROUBLE ON THE TRAY: 26,500 school cafeterias lack required inspections
STATE BY STATE: Many schools not inspected enough
FULL COVERAGE: School lunch safety

The result: Last month, the new kitchen passed inspection without a single violation.

What happened in Eastchester is a textbook example of what members of Congress hoped for when they began requiring two inspections a year for school cafeterias: Problems were identified and resolved before children developed food-borne illnesses.

"I hope more and more when (inspectors) identify a problem, the schools step in and fix it," says Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., who pushed for the inspection rule in 2004. "This is about making sure sanitary conditions are good and kids get the food they need to be healthy."

Here in Westchester County, just north of New York City, records obtained by The (Westchester) Journal News show there were dozens of schools — mainly elementary — that were inspected just once in 2008.

The records from 2006 through 2008 also show that 16% of cafeteria inspections yielded unacceptable ratings, indicating a failure to meet Health Department standards in at least one area. Since 2007, unacceptable conditions led to fines for two more districts — Ossining and Pelham — and forced others to retrain kitchen staff, update equipment or hire consultants.

In the Katonah-Lewisboro district, which had nine unacceptable ratings last year, principals were trained to monitor the cafeterias and take temperatures of food to ensure compliance with the code. The effort paid off: The district has received only one unacceptable rating this year.

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Inspectors found, however, that other districts keep making the same food-safety mistakes. Tuna salad at 60 degrees Fahrenheit (rather than the maximum 45 degrees) and severely dented cans are among the major violations cited this year.

Affluent schools are as likely as their poorer neighbors to get unacceptable ratings. Pelham, Rye and Scarsdale, all prosperous districts, were cited last year for dented cans in their kitchens, putting kids at risk, albeit slight, of botulism. The Yonkers district, the largest and most racially diverse in the county, did not receive a single unacceptable rating for its 39 schools.

Another district that stands out, Lakeland, hasn't had an unacceptable cafeteria rating in four years. Unlike most local districts, which have companies manage their cafeterias and buy in bulk, Lakeland operates its own lunch program.

Raymond Morningstar, the district's assistant superintendent, credits custodians and maintenance workers who ensure that the cafeterias remain clean and operable. Lakeland also plans ahead. Because of the outbreak of H1N1 flu, the district hired workers to operate salad bars instead of having students serve themselves.

"We really felt that we had no choice," Morningstar said.

Ernie Garcia and Cathey O'Donnell are reporters for The Journal News, a Gannett newspaper. Their work on cafeterias can be seen at lohud.com/data.

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